

Callaway Gardens

True family adventures in paradise setting

By Sherri Gardner Howell

One of the slogans for Callaway Gardens sums up the vacation experience at this central Georgia resort perfectly: Gardens are just the beginning.

For families, the gardens and all that the resort brings along as side dishes are sure to please a wide range of ages and interest levels. And while the gardens may not be all there is to offer, they are certainly a good place to start.

One of the reasons I feel so comfortable touting how special Callaway Gardens is is that we did not visit during either of its top seasons. Spring in Callaway, when the lush landscape is ablaze with white, pink and purple azaleas, is a canvas of beauty. Summer and early fall, with the bright green backdrop combine with splashes of flora color and the blues of the lakes, are stunning. Our trip hit after the azaleas and before summer was ready.

Still, we were surrounded by beauty. My husband and I rented a golf cart to traverse the grounds. Callaway is, after all, a 14,000-acre garden, resort and nature preserve with 2,500 acres of it in the garden, so there is a lot of ground to cover! Bicycles would have been an even better choice, and one made by the majority of the vacationers we encountered.

Touring the grounds should include visits to the Callaway Discovery Center, Sibley Horticultural Center, Callaway Brothers Azalea Bowl, Mr. Cason's Vegetable Garden, Meadowlark Garden, Pioneer Log Cabin and, my two favorite, Ida Cason Callaway Memorial Chapel and Butterfly Center. Don't miss the afternoon organ recital at the chapel.

There are two golf courses, my husband's favorite part, which offer 36 holes on the Lake View and Mountain View courses. The Birds of Prey show, set at a cozy lakeside amphitheater, is astonishing for guests of any age and offers a healthy dose of educational information for the children.

In the summer, Callaway Gardens turns into a family paradise, a reputation it has been honing since it opened in 1952. If you went as a child, like my husband, you will be so happy to know that Callaway is still the summer home of the Florida State University Flying High Circus.

The circus, however, is no longer the only entertainment in town. The resort's Summer Family Adventure, offered in June through the mid-September, has packages for children ages 3 to 6 and

7 to 12. The packages include daily activities such as supervised arts and crafts, visits to the Butterfly Center and Birds of Prey Show, miniature golf, learning circus skills, beach games, paddleboat rides, shuffleboard, field sports, tennis, bike hikes and more.

That difficult to engage teenager gets to add ropes courses, a new zipline, waterpark, bumper boats, laser tag, water skiing, arts and crafts, golf clinics, circus skills, golf and tennis matches to the 13 to 18 age package. There is also a Teen Center with video games, dancing and karaoke.

Accommodations are comfortably rustic with great living space. We stayed in the Callaway Southern Pine Cottages, which have a fully-equipped kitchen, dining room, living room, screened-in patio and two bedrooms, each with two queen beds and full bathrooms.

Prices at Callaway are reasonable. If you stay on the premises, admissions to the gardens and other attractions are included. Day passes for those not staying at a Callaway property are \$20 for adults and \$10 for children, beginning at age 6. Children ages 5 and under are admitted free.

The drive from Blount County is approximately five hours. Info: www.callawaygardens.com