

Down on the Farm

(excerpt from article in Parents Magazine)

Cows, barns, and fresh maple syrup are one family's idea of heaven.

By Holly Reich

Whenever we pass a field of cows and horses, my kids beg to stop and watch. As urban dwellers, 4-year-old Jenna and 7-year-old Dylan are far removed from farm life--except for a few house cats and some trips to the petting zoo. And that's exactly why a farm vacation was so appealing to us. There would be animals to pet and feed, and room for the kids to roam. Plus, the uncrowded, relaxing atmosphere was just the kind of down-home experience my husband, Mike, and I were looking for.



As I researched our vacation, I discovered there is a farm to suit almost any family's tastes. There are recreational farms with lots of organized activities and working farms where guests can help out with the chores. Some farms are rustic, while others have pools, hot tubs, and tennis courts. Large farms accommodate several families at a time, while some open their doors to one family only. And though most farms don't offer Ritz Carlton-like amenities and service, guests can count on a warm welcome, homey accommodations, and new experiences. With all these choices, I wanted to ensure that we chose the right farm for our family. Dorothy Jordon, publisher of Family Travel Times, suggests that parents ask the following before making reservations: What are the sleeping arrangements? Is there kitchen access to use the refrigerator or heat a bottle? What opportunities will children have to join in farm life--can they brush and feed the animals? Help bring in the hay? Milk cows? Is there anything for couples to do on their own? If so, is child care available? Are all meals included, or just breakfast? If the kids don't like a meal, are there other options?

A HULL-O FARMS VACATION

Finally, we settled on Hull-O Farms, a 350-acre dairy farm and pheasant preserve, located in Durham, New York, just hours away from our home.

When we arrived for our weekend stay, Frank, our affable and rugged farmer-host, showed us to a cozy white bungalow with two bedrooms, a living room, and an eat-in kitchen. His wife, Sherry, welcomed Jenna with a hug and Dylan with a high-five, then invited them to pick a cookie from the mooing cookie jar.

Surrounded by tractors, cranes, trucks, cows, goats, puppies, kittens, a ram the kids named Princess Leia, and cookies, my children spent the weekend in heaven. We gave the kitties bowls of fresh milk (right from the cow), played with the new puppies, fed baby calves from bottles, climbed haystacks, and chatted with the farmhands. Dylan and my husband took hikes in the Catskills and explored old barns, while Jenna and I took a tractor ride to a sawmill with Frank.

After all the running around in the cold mountain air, there was always the wood-burning stove in the main farmhouse to warm our hands, and the open-armed hospitality of Sherry and Frank.

Each day we enjoyed three meals--served at the main farmhouse's long oak table--with our hosts, their sons, the other guests, and a couple of farmhands. Delicious home-cooked meals ranged from lasagna

and grilled venison to homemade sausage and pancakes with fresh maple syrup (the kids got specially made pancakes with M&M eyes and whipped cream hair). Our conversations were lively and entertaining, and the kids were never bored, since Sherry pulled out toys or videos whenever they got antsy.

Our weekend at the farm was a great success--we got the chance to relax and experience farm life firsthand. None of us wanted to leave. Eventually we coaxed the kids out with a few more cookies. As they kissed their new animal friends good-bye, they were already conjuring up another trip to see the next litter of puppies.