



## Explore the Shore

**Little Talbot allows little ones to put their best explorer foot forward**

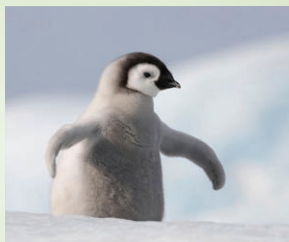
As most parents can attest, children have a natural urge to explore, one that can be difficult to satiate. Scavenger hunts provide an opportunity for active fun and discovery—and an easy way for parents to keep their little ones occupied. At Little Talbot Island State Park, home to more than five miles of undeveloped beaches, registered campers can enjoy a daily interactive nature trail search through the **Hike and Seek** program. Using complimentary compasses, children and their parents will tread a .6-mile loop around the park, all while following a set of clues as they look for hidden boxes containing mementos and prizes. Recording their findings on notepads, little explorers will also learn about the natural resources within Little Talbot. The free program runs seven days a week throughout the year, from 8 AM until dusk, and is best suited for children ages 5-12 years.

[floridastateparks.org/reserveamerica.com](http://floridastateparks.org/reserveamerica.com) \*

BY CAMILLE TODARO

**THE SEASON FOR SCIENCE:** If you need time to get some holiday shopping done (and a way to keep your kids occupied in the meantime), day camp might be a good solution. The **Museum of Science and History** is offering a series of winter discovery camps December 19-January 3, 9 AM-3 PM. The cost is \$55 per day, and topics include Winter Wonderland (where kids learn about creatures that thrive in cold weather) and Under The Big Top (which teaches kids the role science plays in circus acts). \*

BY VIRGINIA CHAMLEE



# EUROPEAN IMPORT

**FAMILIES ON THE FIRST COAST ADOPT A FOREIGN APPROACH TO CHILD CARE** BY LAURA HAMPTON

**F**ew endeavors strike fear in the hearts of working parents like the search for good, reliable child care. Not only is it difficult to entrust your children to strangers, but it can also be very expensive.

In their search for quality care, some families in Northeast Florida are turning to au pairs. Though an uncommon choice in the U.S., au pairs provide child care in exchange for room and board, plus the opportunity to learn about American culture.

"The majority of au pairs want to come to the U.S. to have the experience of living in another country," says Abby Davisson, area director for AuPairCare.

The first official au pair program in the U.S. was established in 1986. Though a relatively new concept here, au pairs have been used in Europe for generations.

A young adult between the ages of 18 and 26, an au pair travels from a foreign country for the express purpose of providing child care or performing child care-related duties for a host family. The au pair lives with the host family 24/7

and usually stays for one year, although his or her work visa can be extended for 12 months if all parties are in agreement.

The term au pair (pronounced "õ pear") comes from a French expression meaning "on a par" or "equal to," which indicates, unlike domestic workers, au pairs become part of the family.

Anneliese Clark has been using au pairs for 13 years. A local mother of four, Clark has hosted au pairs from Mexico, Brazil and Germany, many of whom have become extended family members.

"We still keep in touch with a lot of them," Clark says. "Some of them have come back to visit with their boyfriends and babies."

In the U.S., au pair programs are regulated by the U.S. Department of State, which sets guidelines for the host family to follow. For instance, the au pair must have his or her own bedroom, he or she can only work 45 hours per week, and the au pair must receive a stipend of \$195.75 per week.

The weekly stipend is the same regardless of the number of children, which makes the program cost-effective





for parents with more than one child.

"The biggest misconception people have about au pairs is that you have to be extremely wealthy like Tiger Woods or Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie to afford one. Really, that's not the case," Davisson says.

Cultural exchange is a big part of the au pair program. The Department of State requires the au pair to take some type of educational class while he or she is in the country, and the host family is responsible for paying up to \$500 for these classes.

Usually, the au pair chooses English as a second language. "I really thought we'd all learn another language," Clark says. "But the girls are so focused on learning our language and culture that it became more about their learning from us."

Like any child care option, hosting an au pair has its disadvantages.

Felix Mitchell, a local father of two, has had both good and bad experiences communicating with au pairs. His former au pair came from Brazil to learn better English, but his current au pair from Germany has been studying English since she was in elementary school. "Of course, if you wanted to get a Korean au pair, and you don't speak Korean, there are going to be some communication issues," Mitchell says. "You're going to have to accept that."

The screening process for au pairs is extensive. Each au pair submits an application that includes short-answer questions and a written essay. Once approved, the au pair must pass a psychometric exam and full police background check. He or she must provide at least two professional child care references and undergo a full health evaluation, and then the au pair is interviewed in the respective overseas office where he or she must answer questions in English.

Parents can search through thousands of candidates online and, when the search is narrowed down to a few, start the process of communicating with their choices via email and Skype.

Local mother of three Christina Charbonneau was very thorough during the screening process. Since she has a child with diabetes, Charbonneau wanted an au pair who would and could handle the special needs of her child. "The diabetes was my No. 1 priority because it wasn't going to work if someone was squeamish about needles or wasn't really comfortable with understanding how diabetes works."

Though not for everyone, au pairs can be a good option for parents in search of quality child care. Au pairs are young enough to keep up with adventurous youngsters, yet responsible enough to ensure your children are well cared for while you're at work. Then, there's the added benefit of welcoming someone from another culture into your home.

"It's like a hospitality mentality," Clark says. "I want my children to have that." \*



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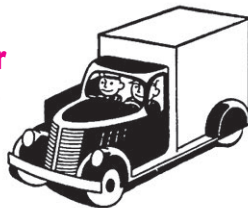
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