

Beyond the Bahamas and Mexico: 10 domestic spring break destinations where you don't have to mess with COVID-19 tests

(Courtesy of Alexandra Owens, The Points Guy)

When it comes to spring break, tropical Caribbean getaways rank at the top of many bucket lists. But with lingering COVID-19 restrictions, including a required viral test (regardless of vaccination status or citizenship) no more than one day before you return to the U.S., many people aren't quite ready to make the leap to international travel.

Fortunately, there are plenty of domestic cities where mild weather, thrilling activities, outdoor adventures and, in some cases, even sunny beaches offer a fun-filled escape in March and April. We've rounded up 10 of the best destinations in the country where you can play hooky.

Portland, Oregon

Spring in Portland is marked by rising temperatures (expect somewhere between the mid-40s and upper 60s) and blossoming cherry trees, azaleas, rhododendrons and roses throughout the city's many beautiful parks and gardens. Some of the best places to enjoy peak bloom season in this outdoors-focused hub include the lush Lan Su Chinese Garden, Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden and Portland Japanese Garden, where you can also indulge in traditional Japanese tea and sweets. While Oregon's nearby beaches aren't ideal for swimming, they are a hot spot for whale watching this time of year when as many as 20,000 gray whales migrate between Alaska and Mexico.

With flowers, of course, come showers, so plan for indoor activities during rainy mornings. Head to the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, one of the country's leading science centers, which has a planetarium, giant-screen theater and a retired U.S. Navy submarine, the USS Blueback, that you can even spend the night on with prior reservations.

Where to stay: Portland is full of funky, independent hotels, but it also has its share of points properties. Check into the kid-friendly Kimpton RiverPlace Hotel, which boasts a bedtime butler who delivers treats for adults and kids, for as little as 37,000 IHG Rewards points per night. The Nines, A Luxury Collection Hotel, located in a landmark building that housed the Meier & Frank department store where Clark Gable once worked, is available for just 40,000 Marriott Bonvoy points per night.

Santa Fe, New Mexico

With ski season over and mild, cloudless weather reaching into the 70s, spring is a perfect time to visit this Southwest city (and take advantage of off-peak prices). The oldest state capital in the U.S., Santa Fe offers a slew of fascinating activities, from outdoor adventures to culinary experiences. Learn about a local legend at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, which displays over 1,000 of the late artist's works, and discover the area's rich cultural heritage at Museum Hill where you'll find the insightful Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, the Museum of Spanish Colonial Art and the International Folk Art Market. For a look at some contemporary art the whole family will love, stop by Meow Wolf's House of Eternal Return, a multimedia experience that's best described as a combination of a jungle gym, children's museum and immersive art exhibit. To step back into the past, explore Santa Fe Plaza, the city's vibrant center and a National Historic Landmark, or arrange a trip outside town to visit Bandelier National Monument, home to some of the most fascinating ancient cliff dwellings in the region, or Chimayo, a historic village with a robust arts and crafts heritage.

Where to stay: Set up your home base in the middle of the action at Hilton Santa Fe Historic Plaza, located just two blocks from Santa Fe Plaza. Rates start at 40,000 Hilton Honors points per night at this Category 6 property.

Gulf Shores, Alabama

Dreaming of a beach vacation but not sure you can handle the rowdy spring break crowds? Gulf Shores just might be what you're looking for. For the sixth year in a row, the destination is banning alcohol on the beach until April 18. Along the miles of soft, white sand, you can enjoy a plethora of watersports, including parasailing and snorkeling. Just be aware that in March and April temperatures range from the high 60s to the low 80s — so the water may be a bit chilly. Not to worry: There's more than enough to do on boats and on dry land, including fishing, dolphin watching and golfing. You can also visit the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo, look for gators in Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge and go fishing on Gulf State Park Pier.

Vero Beach, Florida

In Florida, summers can be oppressively hot and humid — not to mention rainy — making spring one of the best times to visit. Skip the more popular destinations in favor of a vacation to less-touristy (but no less sunny) Vero Beach on the state's so-called Treasure Coast and enjoy lazy days swimming, beachcombing and lounging. Any one of the area's beaches is perfect for enjoying the beautiful weather in the area known as "the gateway to the tropics." With the longest boardwalk in Vero Beach, Jaycee Park is great for a stroll and a picnic, while Humiston Park is within walking distance of the bustling shopping district. Craving an adventure? Go on a snorkel or dive excursion to see the shallow-water shipwreck SS Breconshire. Meanwhile, at Round Island Park, a favorite spot for locals and visitors to kayak or canoe, you're also almost guaranteed to see a manatee.

Where to stay: With ocean views and gorgeous rooms, the [Kimpton Vero Beach Resort & Spa](#) is undoubtedly the best luxury pick in town, but that comes at a price: 120,000 IHG Rewards points per night. A more modest option is the new Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott Vero Beach, where rooms will cost you around 40,000 Marriott Bonvoy points per night.

Nashville

Shake off your winter blues during a spring break getaway to Music City. While the weather can be unpredictable — look out for lows in the mid-40s, highs in the low 70s and a decent amount of rain — there's a lot to keep you busy indoors. Explore music history at the new National Museum of African American Music or the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, catch a show at the Grand Ole Opry or one of the city's many dance halls, or learn about rare cars at the Lane Motor Museum. If it's sunny, head to Centennial Park to admire the full-scale replica of the Parthenon built for Tennessee's 1897 Centennial and International Exposition, take a horseback riding lesson in Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park or drive to Chattanooga for a daytrip.

Where to stay: Nashville has no shortage of [points hotels](#), including the ultra stylish Thompson Nashville, where rooms feature hardwood floors, barn doors and floor-to-ceiling windows. A Category 6 property in the World of Hyatt program, you can check in for 21,000-29,000 points per night.

Hilton Head Island, South Carolina

A popular multigenerational retreat, Hilton Head Island boasts lovely weather and some of the warmest water on the Eastern Seaboard in the spring. With temperatures reaching the high 70s and sparser crowds than in the summer, it's an ideal time to wander the island's 12 miles of beaches and ride bikes along the shoreline. If you get antsy, choose from a variety of other activities like fishing, golfing, kayaking, paddleboarding and zip lining, or visit the Audubon Newhall Preserve and Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge. Hilton Head is also home to a thriving arts community. Browse some galleries or visit the Gullah Museum for an immersive presentation of the customs, traditions and stories of the local Gullah people.

Where to stay: If you want a big beachfront resort, look no further than the Marriott Hilton Head Resort & Spa, which can be booked for around 35,000 Marriott Bonvoy points per night.

Galveston, Texas

With an astounding 32 miles of shoreline, it's all about the beach in Galveston. March and April are warm, but not sweltering, so even if the water hasn't quite reached bathtub temperature, you should still be able to splash and swim in the Gulf Coast's waves. Family-friendly Stewart Beach (where alcohol isn't permitted) hosts a number of activities throughout the year, including sports competitions, yoga on the beach, drive-in movies and sandcastle-building lessons. Located at the far eastern tip of the island, East Beach has a boardwalk and stage where you can find concessions and festivals. There's lots of entertainment away from the water, too. Go golfing at Moody Gardens, ride the coaster at historic Pleasure Pier and explore the city's 40-block residential historic district.

Where to stay: Enjoy an oceanfront location and poolside cabanas at the Hilton Galveston Island Resort, where you can book a room for as little as 61,000 Hilton Honors points per night.

Savannah, Georgia

Take advantage of Savannah's glorious springtime weather, when temperatures creep into the high 70s and the city's botanical gardens bloom, and spend the week wandering Georgia's oldest city. Seek out local history through a number of historic homes that are open for tours, including the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home, the home of Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low and the Mercer Williams House, which was the scene of the crime in "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil." Savannah also has a thriving arts scene on display at the Telfair Museums and the SCAD Museum of Art. Conveniently located on the coast, Savannah has easy access to nearby beaches and barrier islands. Nature lovers can journey to Tybee Island, less than an hour away, to search for seashells and climb Georgia's oldest lighthouse.

Where to stay: The [Andaz Savannah](#) on Ellis Square is mere steps from City Market and its surrounding shops and restaurants. Grab a room at the World of Hyatt Category 4 property for just 12,000-18,000 points per night.

Catalina Island, California

If you have your heart set on an island getaway, consider California's subtropical paradise of Catalina Island, just 22 miles off the coast of Los Angeles. With warm temperatures year-round, you'll have no trouble diving right into outdoor activities like paddleboarding in Avalon Bay, kayaking to Frog Rock, snorkeling at Descanso Beach or embarking on an undersea cruise in a roomy, climate-controlled cabin of a semisubmarine where you'll come face-to-face with colorful fish and other marine life. On dry land, explore the wild, pristine interior of the island by golf cart — be sure to snap Instagram-worthy views of the bay and city — and challenge the family to a game of miniature golf at Catalina Island's Golf Gardens. Meanwhile, thrill-seekers are sure to love the Catalina Climbing Wall and Zip Line Eco-Tour, which offers jaw-dropping views from 600 feet above sea level.

Where to stay: Catalina Island is populated with quaint boutique hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, including the charming Catalina Canyon Inn (the former Holiday Inn Resort Catalina Island).

Austin, Texas

This funky, crowd-pleasing city shines in spring when temperatures peak in the 80s. Soak up the sunshine by renting a stand-up paddleboard or kayak on Lady Bird Lake or taking a dip in Barton Springs, one of the most popular spots in town for locals and tourists alike. While searching for the best barbecue in town, stop for a photo op at one of the city's quirky and colorful murals, including the "Greetings from Austin" mural located where South First Street and West Annie Street intersect. No visit is complete without stopping by the city's bustling downtown area. Walk to the State Capitol building, delve into Texas history at the Bob Bullock Museum and watch 1.5 million bats emerge every night from March through October at the Congress Avenue Bridge.

Where to stay: Check in to the Driskill Hotel in downtown Austin, one of the city's most historic and best boutique [properties](#). Part of Hyatt's Unbound Collection, rooms go for just 17,000-20,000 points a night.