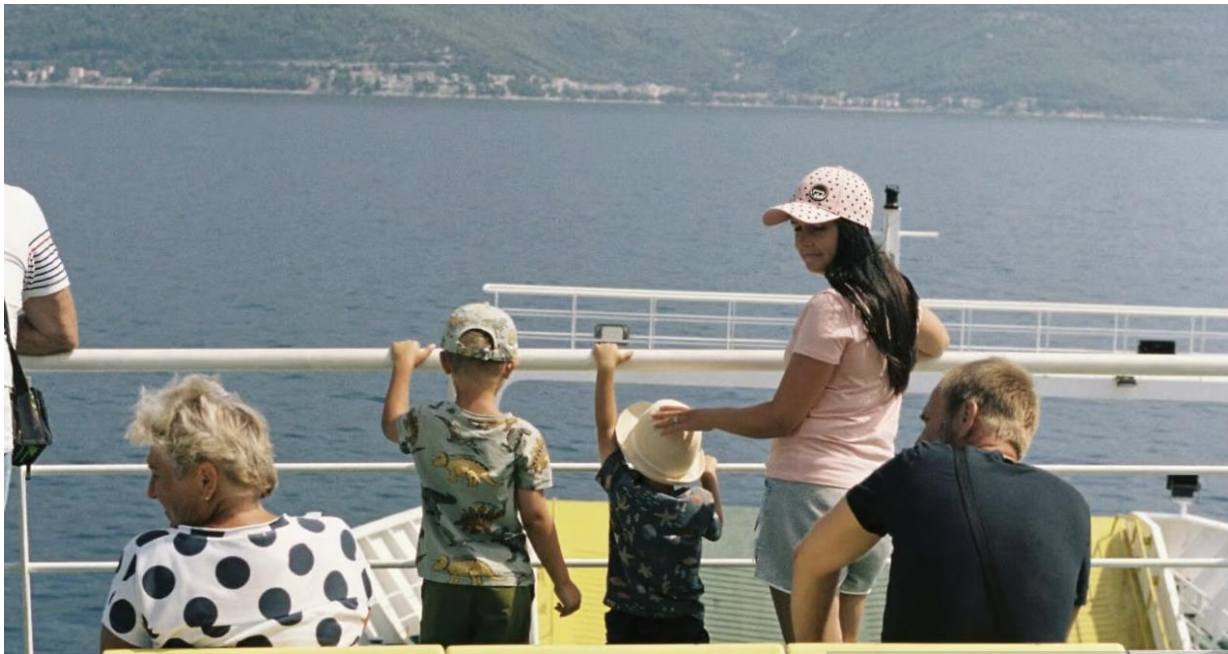


MOTHERLY

10 family-friendly ferry rides worth planning a summer trip around



Flying with kids has never been my idea of a fun time, but these days it's even less appealing. Between the car seat gate-check chaos, TSA lines that stretch into infinity, and a gamble as to whether or not you'll even make it to your destination, it's enough to swear it off completely. (And don't even get me started on the \$47 airport sandwich that no one actually eats.)

Ferry travel is one of the most underrated ways for families to vacation in the U.S.—and summer 2026 is the perfect time to try it. Unlike cramming into an airplane, a ferry ride gives your kids room to move, something to look at that isn't a seat-back screen, and that open-water magic that makes even a jaded tween put their phone down for a minute. (I've seen it with my own bare eyeballs.) Some of these routes are quick little hops to car-free islands. Others are four-hour crossings that feel like a mini cruise. All of them are worth building a trip around.

Here are 10 family-friendly ferry routes across the country, organized by region, that will have your crew saying “can we do that again?” before you even dock.

Southeast ferries

9. Beaufort to Shackleford Banks, North Carolina

If your family wants a true adventure—the kind where you pack your own water and there’s no gift shop, just a wild, wind-swept barrier island with feral horses—Shackleford Banks is it. This undeveloped island is part of the Cape Lookout National Seashore, and the only way to reach it is by a short passenger ferry from the Beaufort waterfront.

The Banker Ponies are the headliners here. Believed to descend from shipwrecked Spanish mustangs, they roam freely across the beaches and maritime forest. Kids will be transfixed (remind them to keep a safe distance—these are wild animals, not a petting zoo). Beyond the horses, there’s world-class shelling, ghost crabs to chase at the waterline, and the kind of empty, gorgeous beach that barely exists anymore on the East Coast.

- Duration: Approximately 10-15 minutes
- Cost: Varies by operator; typically ~\$15–20/person round trip
- Reservations: Recommended; book online in advance
- Season: April through November

Pro tip: This is a pack-it-in, pack-it-out situation. Bring sunscreen, water, snacks, and shade (there isn’t much). There are no facilities on the island. It’s not a full-day outing for most families with young kids, but a few hours on Shackleford Banks will be a core memory for everyone.