FAMILY

5 Graduate Tempe

TEMPE, ARIZONA

Unless you went to college in a big city, a revisit to your alma mater usually means staying at a nondescript chain hotel. That's what Graduate Hotels wanted to change when they launched in 2014. Their niche is creating cool, quirky boutique properties in college towns geared toward students, families, and alumni. Think millennial-cool versus Marriott.

Each location honors the town's history, culture, and ties to its university. Graduate Tempe, the brand's inaugural property, pays tribute to Arizona State's impressive life sciences and human origins work. There's a digital print of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the lobby, Native American pieces sourced by the university's art department, and a large-scale ant farm created in partnership with ASU's Social Insect Research Group.

You'll find Southwestern-appropriate oranges, pinks, reds, and yellows, along with a retro diner and a poolside Mexican cantina. There are 141 rooms, all with patios facing either the campus or the neighborhood (for a quieter stay), and interior design that's bold and colorful. Perks include free bike rentals and a shuttle into town, and there's no room charge for four-legged friends. In fact, your pup will get a complimentary BarkBox gift package as well as a bowl and blanket for the stay. *From $129; graduatehotels.com/tempe*

5.5 HOURS or 1 HOUR

Cambria Beach Lodge

3 more FAMILY ADVENTURES

Cambria Beach Lodge

CAMBRIA, CALIFORNIA

This low-key getaway is set on Moonstone Beach, a relatively untouched area two hours north of Santa Barbara with tide pools, a boardwalk, and water sports. There are also Linus Bike rentals at the hotel, and it's a short drive to Hearst Castle and other landmarks. Don't miss a visit to Piedras Blancas, a protected beach that's home to a rookery of elephant seals in late winter and early spring. Mating season peaks around Valentine's Day... enough said. *From $179; cambriabeachlodge.com*

6 HOURS

Mammoth Mountain Chalets

MAMMOTH LAKES, CALIFORNIA

What used to be a sleepy mountain town has morphed into a full-blown, family-friendly venue with 300 days of sunshine a year. These cozy chalets in the woods are individual slope-side ski-in ski-out cabins with full kitchens and fireplaces. Make sure to visit Woolly's for snow tubing, the upscale Mammoth Rock N Bowl alley, and the great ski school program at the main lodge (worth the hefty price tag). *From $255; mmchalets.com*

7 HOURS or 1.5 HOURS

Portola Hotel & Spa

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

From this nautical-themed hotel, it's a five-minute walk to Fisherman's Wharf and 1.5 miles to the famed Monterey Bay Aquarium, with plenty more for kids to do in between. The hotel's Portola Pirates Program for kids includes a self-guided treasure hunt throughout the property, and an Aquarium package bundles tickets, accommodations, and breakfast. *From $169; portolahotel.com*

7.5 HOURS or 1.5 HOURS

Woolly's Tube Park in Mammoth