The perfect end to summer vacation: A trip to the Maryland State Fair

When we see the Ferris wheel rise into the sky, we know it's coming: the Maryland State Fair.

I don't know whether the fair truly is the best 11 days of summer, but it's our fair, landing practically in our backyard.

It's expensive and busy and often swelteringly hot, but we are drawn to it, like a moth enticed to a vibrant flame full of large stuffed sloths. We can't not go.

I'm off this week with our boys, and we always make an annual trip to the fair. It's part of our end-of-summer fling, our attempt to squeeze the very last fun out of summer vacation before school starts next week.

This is also our week to try to put bedtimes back into place and finish those pesky summer reading assignments. I'm not sure we're doing as well with those.

Still, we're doing a bang-up job on summer fun, if I do say so myself.

We pull into the Maryland State Fairgrounds parking area, followed a couple to their car, happily took their spot, and headed to the ticket line. In a world where two-day shipping seems slow, waiting in the fair line is part of the excitement. Then we're in, and we are off to explore.

I'm willing to see going to the fair as a financial investment in our end-of-summer blitz, but I'm not willing to leave our entire savings on the midway—especially while we are also renovating our kitchen. So, I let the boys each pick one game and two rides.

Our sons might rather have unlimited-ride wristbands, but they are content. We walk around and around, looking for just the right game and deciding on the rides. We smile at every carnival worker and say we might be back.

I don't have any preference on games, though I do have preferences on rides. Maybe one day I'll have the courage to let them on the ones that spin and twirl them toward the skies at rapid speeds, but this is not that day.

They choose the bumper cars and a coaster, which one loves and one says was OK, but he doesn't need to ride more than once a day.

Selecting a game is harder. They finally settle on one where you try to throw a ball into a bucket. We win nothing, and that's going to have to be fine. Then we head to the Exhibition Hall.

We find a Lego exhibit and a place to build with Legos, and then our younger son—the baseball enthusiast—spots a baseball-related exhibit focused on the history of African-American baseball players in Baltimore.

We stop by and chat with the men who are there. We swap Brooks Robinson stories and hear from one who has also met Eddie Murray and Frank Robinson. I love that we've stumbled across a history lesson at the fair, and I could have stayed all day. But I am not at the fair alone, and my companions keep me moving to the Maryland Lotto table, where I spin a wheel to win a free prize.

"I hope I win the earbuds," I say, and then I do! We need earbuds for school—the last item left on our school supply list. But the lottery has come through for me.

Feeling like a winner, we stop to buy a vivid blue slushee on our way to the Cow Palace. It is all liquid and no ice and overflows, running down my leg and into my sock, and leaving my son's hands a sticky mess.

We get a replacement slushee for free, and I do a quick scan of the fairgrounds and spot a handwashing station. Victory is ours!

That’s the fair, you know? Winning and losing and finding handwashing stations when your hands are covered in blue stickiness.

We check out the baby chicks and the cows and part of a dog show, and then we’re on our way—satisfied and content to wait another year before we return.

Because we know—and you do too—that we’ll be back for our state fair fix again next year.