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Cancun: Including the kids at an all-inclusive

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We're normally independent travelers. I want to get that out there right now. Last time my husband Mark and I were in the Yucatan, we stayed in three places during our seven days, traveled almost exclusively by public bus, and we pre-booked only one hotel. No guided excursions, no buffet meals. We wore ourselves out scuba diving and visiting Mayan ruins and World Heritage sites.

So how did we end up at an all-inclusive resort in Cancun, a town void of culture and created for tourists? One where we never converted our dollars to pesos? Where the biggest culinary decision was which room to sit in for our buffet meal?

One word: kids.

My parents, for their 45th anniversary, wanted to take the family on a trip -- six adults and three kids, ages 4 and 6. We wanted a place where we could explore historic spots on day trips, yet have a home base to hang out. We didn't want the hassle of searching out restaurants that could seat nine, then pulling out the credit card for every meal. We wanted baby-sitting with kid-centric activities, giving the adults time for tennis, sailing and scuba diving, things we can't do with the little ones in tow.

We booked a week at Club Med Cancun.

We hoped our kids would learn a little Spanish. They went in knowing how to count to diez, and important words like cerveza, gracias and hola.

But only one of the GOs (Club Med lingo for Genial Organizers, the most visible staff members) was Mexican. Everyone but the cleaning staff spoke perfect English.

Club Med was not a typical Mexico experience.

To get a taste of Mexico, we booked some excursions off the resort: the Mayan ruins at Coba and Tulum and the Xcaret eco-park -- both with the kids -- and an adults-only scuba trip to Chac Mool.

PLENTY OF CHOICES

Less than a two-hour flight from South Florida, Cancun has at least 14 all-inclusive resorts featuring kids clubs, water sports, beaches, round-the-clock food, and of course, frozen alcoholic drinks with umbrellas.

The trend is to make resorts more family-friendly. For those of us with young kids, this is a great development.

After Hurricane Wilma devastated Cancun in 2005, Club Med poured \$20 million into its formerly adults-only resort on the edge of the hotel strip, adding "Mini Club Med" facilities for kids four to 10, and "Passworld" for 'tweens and teens.

Club Med has one other Mexico resort, on the Pacific coast in Ixtapa, which we visited in March. While the Cancun site has an excellent kids' program, adults vacationing without children can still feel like they're having a grown-up holiday. Some women even sunbathed top-less on the beach. There was no topless sunbathing at Club Med Ixtapa. The focus is all kids, all the time, with programs for babies as young as 4 months.

Both Club Meds have a fabulous circus staff who perform professional quality trapeze shows, while teaching kids (and adults) to use the trapeze during the day.

Club Med Ixtapa takes it a step further, adding tightrope walking and a club-wide circus show featuring the kids. More than 110 kids, complete with costumes and make-up, performed for excited parents. Zachary, my 4-year-old, dressed up as a tiger and did tricks with the "tiger tamer."

While Club Med Ixtapa has always catered to families, other resorts, like Club Med Cancun and other hotels in Mexico, are amping up their programs to draw in the generations.

FITTING IN

As first-timers at an all-inclusive, we had a lot to learn at Club Med Cancun, but an orientation filled us in, and a bulletin board outside the dining room held the week's schedule.

Being a type-A person, I figured we'd drop the kids off at the Mini Club at 9 a.m. and head to tennis lessons, then go across the road for sailing lessons. We'd have lunch, then hit the beach and snorkel.

Fortunately the kids liked the Mini Club, but I wasn't able to keep up the pace of activities that I envisioned.

At Mini Club, the kids played on the beach (but weren't allowed in the ocean without their parents), swam in the Mini Club's shallow pool, went to nature programs, ate lunch and made crafts.

One day they practiced for a talent show, then performed that night decked out in makeup and Mexican outfits. For this, they received medals, which are still hanging in their rooms.

Most days Zachary was excited for us to pick him up at 5 p.m. because it meant Happy Hour. The kid who never gets soda at home got a Shirley Temple infusion every afternoon, along with appetizers by the pool.

With evening shows and a late dinner, the kids went to bed every night at least an hour past their normal bed time. This meant they woke up late. And trying to corral three kids into a morning routine wasn't easy. Add in six adults, and getting to breakfast by 10 a.m. was a miracle.

So the kids missed the 9 a.m. trapeze lesson most days, which was a shame. Those who didn't want to fly on the trapeze could jump on the trampoline instead. This was a popular option for kids like Zachary who had no interest in trapeze.

Tykes as young as four can use the trapeze. The child is hooked into various belts and ropes, then climbs the ladder to the platform, where a GO holds her up by the belt. The child grabs the trapeze bar, the GO lets go and the kid sails through the air, sometimes hooking her legs onto the bar, hanging upside down.

My 6-year-old daughter Dori wouldn't try it until the last day, after she saw her parents, aunt and uncle take a turn. To say I was terrified trying it is an understatement. To say I looked good would just be a lie. But I did it, and so did Dori. It was a proud parenting moment.

The buffet dinner was surprisingly good and always had kid-friendly grub like pizza, hamburgers, french fries, fruit, plain pasta, bread, cheese and soft-serve ice cream. Baby food, baby yogurt and milk were available at every meal, as were high chairs.

We enjoyed a few adult meals at the a la carte restaurants, while the kids ate with the Mini Club staff.

The adults in my family attended one of the kids' after-dinner programs -- a painfully silly skit done by characters known as Pizza and Spaghetti. The kids laughed uproariously, as little ones do at humor aimed right at their level. And it was a bonding moment for the adults -- if one of us says Pizza in a funny voice, we burst out laughing.

HEADING OUT

When it came to booking our excursions, we debated whether to bring the kids to the Mayan ruins, since the tour isn't recommended for small children. But we weren't comfortable leaving them at Club Med without any family members staying behind, and we wanted them to see something of Mexico other than the beach.

Not surprisingly, the kids were bored.

At Coba, we rented a bicycle cart and driver, who pedaled the kids around the ruins. It was a novel ride for them, and saved us from having to carry them as they bickered with each other.

At Coba's best-known pyramid, Nohoch Mool, our guide warned us that a child died climbing it a few weeks before. That was all we needed to hear, and the kids remained on the first few steps with an adult.

At both Tulum and the Xcaret eco-park, the kids were fascinated by the Voladores, or "fliers." These colorfully dressed Totonac Indians climb what looks like a telephone pole, then hang upside down, while the top of the pole spins them around. Although it's not native to the Yucatan, it's still lovely to watch.

At Tulum, Zachary slept in Mark's arms for at least an hour of the tour, while even the stories of Spanish con-querors didn't hold the interest of Dori and my niece, and they weren't allowed to climb the structures.

But Tulum is on the Caribbean and has a beach, which made it more child-friendly than Coba. We all jumped into the water to cool off.

We also took the kids to Xcaret, an eco-park about 20 minutes south of Cancun. The kids loved it, especially the butterfly enclosure.

The Yucatan is known for its underground rivers, and Xcaret has one that's only partly underground for tourists to float down. Unfortunately it was too cold for Zachary, who resisted getting in, then was so exhausted that he almost fell asleep on his grandpa's back during the 30-minute float.

One downside to staying at an all-inclusive is that it offers fewer sightseeing options of its own and no access to tour companies offering others. We walked to a nearby hotel to book our scuba-diving excursions, since their dive shop offered more flexibility on dive sites and dates.

The logistics of arranging an excursion without our children were unexpectedly difficult. Many excursions leave before the kids' Mini Club starts and return after the 5 p.m. pick-up time. Fortunately, family members who stayed behind dropped off and picked up the children when Mark and I went diving.

At Chac Mool, an underground river unique to the Yucatan, we dove through caverns filled with speleotherms, popping up into an air-filled chamber with a gallery of stalactites and stalagmites. For Mark and me, it was a highlight of the trip.

As for the tight schedule of activities I initially envisioned, we did manage to do many of them.

We did two day trips and two scuba trips and my brother-in-law took me sailing on a catamaran --although I never did take that sailing lesson. I played tennis and swam in the ocean, but the snorkeling was closed due to high winds. In the evenings we danced to live music and saw several evening shows.

At the end of the week, I realized I was exhausted. In all my planning, I had not made time for sunbathing, had not cracked open a book.

Next time I'll make sure to hit the hammocks. The kids are dying to go back. Zachary misses the daily Happy Hour. Dori wants to perform in another talent show. And they're practicing the numbers 11 to 20 in Spanish.

Sidebar:

Taking the kids to an all-inclusive resort

- **Before you book:** If you're not using a travel agent, ask your friends about their all-inclusive experiences. Read reviews on websites like TripAdvisor.com. "You have to read a number of reviews because everyone has different experiences," said Andrea Williams, owner of Exquisite Vacations in Miami.

Look for thematic patterns like the kids' club quality, food, building upkeep, beach quality and staff. Also look for reviews from people traveling around the same time of year you would go. During busy holiday times, are there comments about the staff being overwhelmed or long lines for meals?

If you're using a travel agent, confirm which resorts she personally has seen, and which she knows of through her clients. Look for an agent who specializes in all-inclusives. Your agent doesn't have to be in the same city as you.

- **What's included:** Ask what's included and what costs extra. There may be additional fees for a la carte restaurants, water sports, premium alcohol, gratuities, airport transfers, golf, medical help and Internet access.

Many all-inclusives include kids' clubs in the cost, depending on your child's age. At Club Med, "Mini Club Med" and "Passworld" for 'tweens and teens are free starting at age four. Some locations, like Club Med Ixtapa, have expanded programming like "Baby Club Med" starting at 4 months, though there's an extra cost. At most resorts, hiring a baby-sitter will cost extra.

- **Excursions:** Do you plan to explore outside the resort while your kids are in camp? Many excursions leave before kids' club starts, and return after it ends. If you're not traveling with family or friends who can do pick-up or drop-off, is babysitting available? At Club Med Cancun, we were told pre- and post-excursion baby-sitting was available only for excursions booked through Club Med.

You may not be able to take junior on all the excursions. Some have minimum age requirements.

- **How's the beach?** If your all-inclusive is in an area subject to riptides, the beaches may not be good for swimming. Find out before you book.

- **Food and drink:** Don't go to an all-inclusive expecting grub worthy of a Michelin three-star rating. That said, the buffet restaurant at Club Med Cancun was surprisingly good.

Club Med Cancun provides alcoholic drinks at no extra cost, though some selections may be limited. The only two beers served were "light" and "dark," not ideal for the beer aficionados in our group. And the wine served at dinner wasn't great, so we stuck to mixed drinks.

- **Passports:** All U.S. citizens -- including kids -- need a passport to fly into Mexico. If you're driving or coming to Mexico by boat, you'll need a passport or government issued photo ID or birth certificate, until June 1, 2009. After that date, you'll need a passport. The passport agency currently estimates four to six weeks to process routine applications, or three weeks for expedited service (<http://travel.state.gov/index.html>).

INFORMATION

- Club Med: www.clubmed.com, 888-WEB-CLUB.
- Cancun Convention & Visitors Bureau: www.go2cancun.com.
- Xcaret Eco Theme Park: www.xcaret.com.
- AquaWorld: Scuba diving in Cancun -- www.aquaworld.com.mx.

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