

Busy resort has something for all ages

CONTINUED FROM 1K

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 4 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 topless 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 circus show featuring the children. More than 110 kids, complete with costumes and makeup, 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 bedtime. 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.

Tykes as young as 4 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 is an understatement. To say I looked good would be a lie. But I did it, and so did Dori.

The buffet dinner was surprisingly good and always had kid-friendly grub such as pizza, hamburgers, french fries, fruit, plain pasta, bread, cheese and soft-



PHOTO COURTESY OF CLUB MED CANCUN

Club Med is known for its trapeze program. Kids as young as 4 can fly on the full-size trapeze, harnessed into safety ropes held by staff members.

INFO

■ **CLUB MED:**
www.clubmed.com. (888) WEB-CLUB

■ **CANCUN CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU:**
www.gocancun.com

■ **XCARET:**
www.xcaret.com.

■ **AQUAWORLD:**
www.aquaworld.com.mx

serve ice cream. Baby food, baby yogurt and milk were available at every meal.

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 Mul, 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.

At Tulum, Zachary slept in Mark's arms for at least an hour of the tour, while even the stories of Spanish conquerors 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



DEBORAH ABRAMS KAPLAN/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

The author rented a bicycle cart and driver at the Mayan ruins of Coba to pedal the kids around the site.

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 its dive shop offered more flexibility on 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. pickup 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 swam 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 ac-

tivities 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 shows.

At the end of the week, I realized I was exhausted. 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.

Deborah Abrams Kaplan is a freelance writer based in northern California.



DEBORAH ABRAMS KAPLAN/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

The Totonac "voladores," or fliers of Papantla, perform traditional dances at Tulum and Xcaret. The dance of the Huahuas, pictured here, expresses appreciation for the safe "flight" they just completed.

All-inclusives: What you should know

To make your trip fun for the entire family, do your homework.

DEBORAH ABRAMS KAPLAN
Special to the Express-News

Traveling with kids is hard, which is why many families choose an all-inclusive resort for vacation. Use these tips to help you ask the right questions when picking a resort.

BEFORE YOU BOOK

If you're not using a travel agent, ask your friends about their all-inclusive experiences. Read through reviews on Web sites such as TripAdvisor.com. Even travel agents read it to learn about different properties.

"You have to read a number of reviews because everyone has different experiences," said Andrea Williams, owner and manager of Exquisite Vacations in Miami. "It's surprising how different reviews can be from the same time frame."

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

If 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 the type of trip you want to take. You don't need to use a travel agent in the same city, since you can work out details by phone, e-mail, fax and snail mail.

PRICING

Not surprisingly, the busiest weeks at an all-inclusive are also the most expensive. Those are during school holidays, such as Christmas week and Spring Break (typically Easter week). Prices can more than double during that time. When looking at dates, use the resort's reservation page to get an idea of pricing for different seasons, as well as different weeks. A family of four going to Club Med Cancun for a week in May might pay about \$4,200 (without airfare or travel insurance), whereas during

Christmas week the same trip could cost \$10,800.

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, gratuity, airport transfers, golf, medical help and Internet access.

At many of the all-inclusive resorts, the kids clubs are included 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 4. Some locations, Club Med Ixtapa, for example, have expanded programming. Its Baby Club Med is for children 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 pick up and drop off your children, is baby-sitting available? At Club Med Cancun, we were told pre- and post-excursion baby-sitting was available only for excursions booked through Club Med. And you may not be able to take Junior on all the excursions. Some have minimum age requirements, partly so the other paying adults have an enjoyable experience.

HOW'S THE BEACH?

If you're planning to spend time playing in the ocean, especially with children, this is something to consider before booking. Not all Mexico beaches are swimmable, including those in Los Cabos.

PASSPORTS

All U.S. citizens need a passport flying into Mexico, including kids. 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 need a passport. The passport agency estimates it will take four to six weeks to process routine applications or three weeks for expedited service (travel.state.gov/index.html).



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HOW TO REACH US

Travel Editor Tracy L. Barnett 250-3430
This Week in Texas Jennifer Roof Laster 250-3530
Fax 250-3405

MAIL: San Antonio Express-News
ATTN: Travel
P.O. Box 2171
San Antonio, TX 78297-2171

E-MAIL: tbarnett@express-news.net
jlaster@express-news.net

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