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## Mexican resorts are courting families with more than just kids' stuff

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Many vacationers recall the Club Med of their early adulthood, exchanging beads for drinks in a bacchanalian revelry. With Mexico a mecca for U.S. tourists - Americans account for almost 90% of international arrivals, according to the Mexico Ministry of Tourism - the trend is to make resorts more family-friendly.

Which is a great thing for those of us with young kids. In the wake of 2005's Hurricane Wilma, Club Med Cancun spent \$24 million updating the resort, adding on kids' and teen clubs. The beads are gone, and adults vacationing without the younger set are certainly still welcome. But the resort now also caters to those bringing children.



Traveling with kids is hard enough, which is why many families choose an all-inclusive resort for vacation. Cancun has at least 14 all-inclusives with kids' programming. And just a plane ride away are the resort towns of Los Cabos and

Ixtapa, with dozens of facilities luring families with suites, baby-sitting, piñata parties, circus school, "baby welcome" programs, and round-the-clock pizza and soda. How to choose between them?

## **DO YOUR HOMEWORK**

When choosing an all-inclusive, prioritize what's most important to you, like a great kids' club and a swimmable beach (many in Cabo are plagued with a riptide). One of the best sources of information are independent guest ratings on sites such as TripAdvisor.com. Though anyone can register and leave fake comments - including resort management or its competition - if there's a critical mass of reviews, readers can be more confident of authentic opinions.

For each resort, 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 you would go. During busy holiday times, are there comments about the staff being overwhelmed or long lines for meals?

Rob and Stacy Hughes of Salt Lake City decided on Melia Cabo Real, on the tip of the Baja peninsula, and they booked online for a recent trip with their kids, ages 2 to 5. Stacy said they were thrilled with their vacation, and the best part was the kids' club staff.



"The advisers really seemed to like their job and the kids," said Hughes. "They went swimming, built sandcastles, played video games, painted and sang songs - our boys had so much fun."

As for downsides, others on TripAdvisor had the same complaints - the food was average and the activities and meal service often started late, like a frustrating 45-minute delay for the piñata on fiesta night.

If you're planning to use the kids' club extensively, find out the schedule before booking your trip. Hughes said that Melia Cabo Real's hours were relatively short - 10 a.m. until 1 p.m., then 2 to 5 p.m.

## **PRICING**

With the weak economy, airfare and hotel rates have been drastically reduced. But not surprisingly, the busiest weeks at an all-inclusive are still the most expensive. Those are during school holidays, like Christmas week and spring break (typically Easter week).

When looking at dates, use the resort's reservation page to get an idea of pricing for different seasons, as well as different weeks.

Make sure you know what's included before you book (gratuities, airport transfers, golf, Internet access) and if the activities there will keep you happy: What's there to do in the daytime? Can you leave the resort and leave your kids there? Is there a surcharge at the restaurants?

Some resorts offer more water sports but may have additional charges for them. At Club Med Cancun, for example, waterskiing, sailing lessons and snorkeling are included, while scuba diving is extra.



For adults, the resorts listed here provide alcoholic drinks at no cost, though some selections may be limited. The only two beers served at Club Med Cancun were "light" and "dark," not ideal for the beer aficionados in our group.

Dreams resorts will stock your room's mini-bar with free alcohol, replenished with a phone call. At Melia Cabo, in-room refrigerators contained beer, soda and water - all gratis.

And find out what costs extra. At many all-inclusives, 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, like Club Med Ixtapa Pacific, have expanded programming like "Baby Club Med"

starting at 4 months, though there could be extra costs. 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 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 a good experience.

## **FOOD**

While everyone has different tastes, don't go to an all-inclusive expecting grub worthy of a Michelin three-star rating. As one guest put it, "It's banquet food

made to serve the masses from all over the world. Expect wedding food and you won't be disappointed."

That said, the buffet restaurant at Club Med Cancun was surprisingly good, and some resorts' a la carte restaurants are also known for their cuisine.

Melia Cabo Real's Kujira restaurant got outstanding reviews. Its Asian menu features items like banana-wrapped sushi for the kids.



## **HOW'S THE BEACH?**

In Los Cabos, not all the beaches are good for swimming, due to the ocean's riptide. If you're planning to spend time in the ocean, especially with kids, this is something to consider before booking.

## **PASSPORTS**

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

## **BOOKING THE TRIP**

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.

In the age of online booking, arranging an all-inclusive trip over the Internet couldn't be easier. But take precautions, said Andrea Williams, owner and manager of Exquisite Vacations travel agency in Miami: "When booked online, if it's oversold, who do you call to help you?"

### **If You Go:**

Club Med: <http://www.clubmed.com>. 888-WEB-CLUB

Dreams Los Cabos: <http://www.dreamsresorts.com/>; 866-2-DREAMS

Melía Cabo Real - <http://www.meliacaboreal.com/>; 866-43-MELIA

Exquisite Vacations Travel Agency – <http://www.exquisitevacations.com>; 305-892-3496