



THE CARIBBEAN FAMILY

Where the Pint-Size Are a Big Deal

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

CLOSE your eyes and imagine a Caribbean paradise: throngs of baby sitters minding tots around the raucous swimming pool, chicken fingers on every menu and Big Bird plodding cheerfully along the beach, the white sand drifting across the Muppet's yellow feathers.

A nightmare, you say? Not if you're traveling with kids craving constant activity and entertainment and you're hoping to steal a little time for yourself.

Any resort can throw a pint-size robe in a guest room and call itself family-friendly, but truly family-oriented destinations go to much greater lengths. They feature extravagant pools and splash parks, provide an assortment of all-inclusive restaurants for picky eaters, offer suites with separate children's rooms and, yes, some even put Big Bird on the beach.

That's what Beaches Resorts, in partnership with Sesame Street, is using to cater unabashedly to children and attract families to its properties in the Turks and Caicos and Jamaica. Unlike so many Caribbean resorts that try to be all things to all vacationers, Beaches, the family brand of Sandals resorts, along with Club Med Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic and a few other places, has largely forsaken the newlyweds, retirees and run-of-the-mill tourists. With nannies on hand to care for infants, seemingly nonstop beach games, talent shows and arts and crafts at these places, pretty much no one without children would think of staying there — and that's precisely the point.

"Anyone looking for an adult getaway would feel out of place," said Kyle McCarthy, editor of FamilyTravelForum.com, about such resorts.

Sure, there are plenty of places that offer robust family programs for children ages 5 to 10 — just when they're old enough to entertain themselves. (Give those kids a bucket and a shovel and go back to your book!) But it's the babies and teenagers, who demand constant entertainment and come with erratic tantrums and wild mood swings, that weary parents often need

the most help with and who resorts tend to neglect.

Below, some highlights from places that aim to please all members of the family.

JAMAICA

Beaches Negril Resort

HIGHLIGHT Roaming Sesame Street characters

LOWDOWN This all-inclusive resort invites young guests to bake with Cookie Monster or read books with Elmo, while parents soak in the adults-only hot tub. Older kids can play beach volleyball, participate in a fashion show or play all the Xbox 360 games they can handle. Want some time with the kids? Go sea kayaking, snorkeling or take a scuba diving lesson together for no additional charge.

STARTING RATES \$452 per adult and \$105 per child a night for a six-night stay in early December, including meals, snacks, drinks and most activities. For a splurge, book a two-bedroom beachfront suite, at \$1,620 per adult a night, which comes with a butler to unpack your clothes or draw you a bath. Book a stay of three nights or more and receive up to 50 percent off for travel through Dec. 26. Information: beaches.com

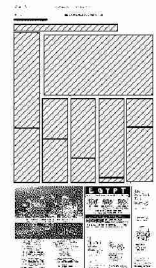
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Club Med Punta Cana

HIGHLIGHT Baby Club Med

LOWDOWN Staffed with nannies trained in infant CPR and an on-site pediatrician, Baby Club Med offers daily supervision from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. for babies as young as 4 months old. But unlike the resort's program for children 4 to 10 years old, there is a cost: \$85 per child per day, which includes 45-minute parent and child movement classes and a baby-food buffet.

When they're not snorkeling, playing tennis or catching air at the skateboarding park, adolescents can head to Club Med Passworld, a teenager and tween hangout with activities like jewelry-making classes and graffiti workshops,





at no extra charge. There is also a Teen Spa, where children 13 and up can get facials, manicures and pedicures.

STARTING RATES \$215 a person a day, based on a seven-night stay and including meals and gratuities. For children 2 to 9 years old the cost is \$65 a day; for 10- to 17-year-olds, \$108. Upgrade to a Family Suite from \$398 a person a day (\$119 for 2 to 9 years old and \$199 for 10 to 17) for a two-bedroom with twin beds and one-and-a-half baths at Tiara, the resort's upscale resort within the resort. Information: clubmed.us

BAHAMAS

Atlantis Resort

HIGHLIGHT Aquaventure water park

LOWDOWN Though this is not an all-inclusive resort, there are several attractions geared toward young guests including 10 family-friendly pools and a 141-acre water park with high-speed slides, rolling rapids and waves. There is also an enormous aquarium where children can get up close to the marine life. Think inner tubing through an underwater tunnel surrounded by sharks.

The resort's children's club, Atlantis Kids Adventures, is not cheap at \$25 an hour or \$45 for a half-day and doesn't take children under the age of 3. But it offers a wide range of activities including culinary lessons and an assortment of play areas from a "grocery store" for tots to a gaming room and computer lab for older siblings. Coming in December is Crush, a 14,000-square-foot hangout for teenagers. The design includes an Internet lounge, a game room with a 32-monitor floor-to-ceiling gaming tower and a dance club with V.I.P. sections, doormen and paparazzi.

STARTING RATE \$455 a night for a room in the Beach Tower, located near the water park. Information: atlantis.com

CURAÇAO

Breezes Curaçao Resort

HIGHLIGHT Circus workshop

LOWDOWN You might not think of Breezes when planning a vacation with children. It's part of the Super-Clubs brand also known for its clothing-optional Hedonism Resorts, and few Breezes properties allow children under the age of 14. But this resort — along with its sister property, Breezes

Trelawny in Jamaica — is another story with nonstop activities for youngsters, a 12,000-square-foot children's center and a dedicated baby pool for the littlest guests. The only nudity you may encounter: perhaps a baby's bare behind on the beach.

Infants and toddlers are catered to in a nanny-supervised nursery. Daredevils as young as 5 can swing from a flying trapeze. For those not into heights there is a rock climbing wall, video arcade and inflatable sumo wrestling costumes. Want some adult entertainment? Sneak off to the on-site casino or book a treatment at the spa.

STARTING RATE \$145 a person a night. Children stay free through Dec. 22 with a three-night stay. Information: breezes.com

JAMAICA

Franklyn D. Resort & Spa

HIGHLIGHT A dedicated "vacation nanny"

LOWDOWN Upon arrival, each family is assigned its own Vacation Nanny who not only looks after the children — taking them to the pool, playground or children's club each day — but also tidies up the room. There is a 100-foot water slide nicknamed Big Blue, a kids' beach and a Kids' Club open from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. with activities for children ages 2 to 11 like photography and snorkeling lessons and pajama parties. For older children there is aerobics, video games, rap sessions, bicycle tours and fashion shows.

STARTING RATES \$280 per adult per night; children ages 6 to 15 stay for \$40 per child per night; \$80 for teens. Children under 6 years old stay free. Grandparents stay free during January. Information: drholidays.com

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Meliá Caribe Tropical

HIGHLIGHT Vacation with the Flintstones

LOWDOWN Throughout their stay, children interact with the cartoon characters — meeting Fred and Dino at check-in, for instance, or eating at Betty's Kitchen. Baby Rocks Club offers a supervised play and nap area for infants and toddlers (4 months to 4 years old) with puzzles, movies, story time and music workshops. Bamm-Bamm Club



offers games and activities like camping and magic workshops for ages 5 to 8 and the Cool Club for 9- to 13-year-olds features competitive outdoor activities like pool games, sports and contests. There are also 10 pools, 8 tennis courts, a 30-foot rock-climbing wall and a zip line.

The action continues after hours with dance and music performances and an on-site casino. Once a week the resort also hosts a Fire Desire party for adults with D.J.'s, dancers and flame-eaters.

STARTING RATES \$234 a person, a night; half that rate for children. Family suites, situated right in front of The Flintstones Land, start at \$269 a person a night and come with kid-friendly amenities like a step stool for the sink, PlayStation games and a baby bath kit. Information: meliacaribetropical.com

ST. LUCIA

Coconut Bay Beach Resort

HIGHLIGHT CocoLand, the resort's own water park

LOWDOWN You know you're at a child-friendly resort when rooms overlook the water park. The family wing of this resort, which is divided into two distinct sections (adult-only and child-friendly), lies steps from water slides, lazy-river tubing and a splash pool. Keep an eye out for the resort's roving coconut mascots Coco and Loco.

When the kids tire of splashing they can head to the Kidz Klub for guided nature hikes, video games and arts and crafts. Babies are supervised in an indoor play area and nap room. Four tennis courts, two basketball courts and a paintball facility add to the list of activities. And that's not counting the beach where volleyball games and kite surfing lessons are offered.

Parents can escape the theme-park style atmosphere at the adults-only pool at the other end of the resort.

STARTING RATE \$112 a person a night. Information: coconutbayresortandspa.com



BREEZES CURAÇAO

Daredevils as young as 5 can swing from a trapeze at Breezes Curaçao. At other resorts, there are roaming Sesame Street or Flintstone characters.