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TRAVEL

Lessons from a first-timer

10 tips to make the most of an all-inclusive vacation

Nicole Pensiero

 $For \, South \, Jersey \, Times$

For as many times as I'd visited island destinations over the years, I'd always shied away from all-inclusive resorts, imagining long buffet lines, crowded swimming pools and watered-down drinks. Even when I heard rave reviews, I never seriously considered going the "full-package" route.

But after floating the idea of a mid-winter getaway to a group of longtime friends to celebrate/escape a "milestone" birthday — mine — I found myself surprised when my Google search ultimately led me to an all-inclusive resort that proved not only a great value, but an amazing vacation experience.

We decided on a trip to the Mexican Caribbean for couple of reasons: half the group had never been "south of the border" and were eager to visit — and Mexico is a decidedly less expensive destination than some of the Eastern Caribbean islands — and even the Bahamas, for that matter. We could not have made a better choice.

The resort we selected — the 4-star, 340-room Royal Sands, located smackdab in the middle of Cancun's coveted beachfront hotel zone - is one of six Mexican properties owned by Royal Resorts, founded in 1975 and considered a pioneer resort company in the Riviera Maya/Cancun region and in the vacation ownership industry. The company, we soon learned, is extremely customer-focused. And it's also big on giving back to the community through the Royal Resorts Foundation. There's even an optional "A Dollar a Stay" program — where it adds \$1 to each guest's bill upon checkout to help fund area charities — including health, education and conservation programs.

FROM HERE AND THERE

Royal Resorts opened its first property, the Royal Cancun, in 1978; the Royal Sands — its largest resort — opened in 2000. What we didn't realize when we booked our trip is how much we could take advantage of other nearby Royal Resorts properties in terms of activities and dining. For example, while our hotel didn't offer snorkeling, the Royal Cancun — just a brief free shuttle ride away — did; and while there, we could enjoy their dining options, too, all through the power of the little "all-inclusive guest" wristbands we were given to wear upon check-in.

The array and quality of our food options were among the most delightful surprises of our four-day stay. From the poolside bar/restaurants to the almost-always opened buffet restaurant, La Veranda, the Royal Sands had something for everyone. We enjoyed two amazing dinners — one, a traditional Mexican meal at Hacienda Sisal on the property; and a second at the nearby Royal Islander's El Conquistador, which specializes in steaks, seafood and flambéed dishes, all presented in the most elegant style and accompanied by the stylings of a very talented guitarist.

And while we were less enthralled with the popular Captain's Cove — also reachable via the resort's free shuttle bus service — it earned points for the amazing sunset views and a visit by one of its two resident **SEE TRAVEL, B6**



Water aerobics is a popular activity at the Royal Sands Hotel & Spa. Be sure to take advantage of all aspects of all-inclusives. Nicole Pensiero



Miss Piggy has a past to share. Scott Garfield

FILM

Miss Piggy's backstory and other Muppet secrets

Sandy Cohen Associated Press

Only Miss Piggy's creator knows the depths of her tragic origin story. Frank Oz, who gave life to the character in the early 1970s, says Piggy left her hometown farm for life in the big city after her dad died in a tractor accident and she had a falling out with her mother.

Piggy went to charm school once she got

to the Big Apple, Oz says, "but she had to pay for it, so she did some things she wasn't proud of." (A bacon commercial, he adds.)

Gonzo's daring nature was born out of puppeteer Dave Goelz's personal insecurities, and actor/puppeteer Jerry Nelson drew on Eeyore's depressive demeanor to create Snuffleupagus' signature phrase — "Oh, dear" — on "Sesame Street."

It takes more than a wacky voice to bring a Muppet to life. Every character has a detailed backstory dreamed up by the puppeteer behind it — or rather, beneath it. The artists who created some of the Muppets' most beloved characters — Cookie Monster, Grover, Count von Count, Bunson Honeydew, Animal, Prairie Dawn and Pepe the King Prawn — shed light on their creative processes and their characters' secret backstories in a new documentary, "Muppet Guys Talking," available online Friday.

"This is a great opportunity to show people who the people were underneath," says Oz, who directed the film. "Besides the idea of showing the world the culture in which we lived and worked because of (Muppets creator) Iim (Henson)"

ator) Jim (Henson)." Featuring original Muppet performers Oz, Goelz and Nelson, along with Fran Brill and Bill Barretta, the 65-minute documentary is a love letter to Henson and the creative community he developed. The five artists discuss their memories, moments of inspiration and the challenges of working with puppets.

For example, during the opening of 1979's "The Muppet Movie," in which Kermit sits on a log in the middle of a lake, strumming a banjo, the 6-foot-tall Henson was crunched into a steel canister underwater. His arm was overhead, controlling Kermit, and a microphone ran into the submerged container to capture Henson's voice.

"He would do anything," Goelz says. "I think we all learned commitment from that."

Henson also welcomed ideas from **SEE MUPPETS, B6**



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crocodiles (which have a neighboring bar, Pancho & Willy's, named in their honor).

As a first-time (but certainly not last-time all-inclusive traveler), here are a few travel tips for fellow newbies interested in all-inclusive vacations:

1. Bundle your air travel with a hotel **stay:** We found that a hotel-air package provided the best value for our money. We had two regular hotel rooms, one of which adjoined a large suite that came complete with a living room, full kitchen and an expansive balcony. The two "regular" hotel room packages came in at under \$950 - and that included the all-inclusive stay, airfare, and transportation to and from the airport to the resort.

2. If you're traveling with a large group, **book as a group:** I was the point person for our booking and every one in our party provided me with their passport numbers and dates of birth. That definitely made things easier for traveling outside the U.S., figuring out our room configurations, and for pay-

3. Do your homework: Every all-inclusive is different. While the Royal Sands promotes itself as a family destination, we learned that they also have a second, smaller, "quiet" swimming pool for adultsonly. Often, all-inclusive resorts cater to specific groups of travelers. In other words, if you're planning a honeymoon or anniversary trip, you may want to consider an alladults property. We felt like we had the best of both worlds at the Royal Sands.

4. Be mindful of what time of year you're traveling: We knew February was high-season, but were a bit surprised to find guests staking out their beach chairs by 6:30 a.m. (despite nicely worded signs asking them not to). We never had trouble finding beach chairs, so it ending up being a non-issue, but if you have flexibility, keep in mind that the months after spring break (mid-April, May and June) can be great (and less crowded) times to visit an all-inclusive

5. Get to know the concierge staff: The Royal Sands assigns a personal concierge to all its guests; our point person provided us with countless tips and ideas to make the most of our stay. We also visited the guest services desk more than once to get the lowdown on meals, drinks, tipping (a 7-percent tip was included for wait staff with our package; we supplemented that amount as we went along.)

6. Take advantage of the perks: The Royal Sands has tons of activities for both adults and kids, including morning water

aerobics and frequent yoga and Zumba classes. You could also borrow a bicycle if you were motivated to pedal around the area. And if you're open to sitting through a 90-minute presentation about owning a time share at the resort, you can enjoy extra perks, like reduced-price spa treatments or sightseeing excursions.

7. Make dinner reservations: This seems to be a biggie with all-inclusives across the board. While the Royal Sands has plenty of quick and easy on-site dining options, the gourmet, non-buffet restaurants — either on the property or nearby — were extremely popular, and some required an advance booking for the shuttle to get there.

8. Indulge in room service: Even if it's just to have coffee and tea delivered to your room before heading down to that luscious breakfast buffet, indulge yourself. If it's included, which it was at our resort, it's a very nice perk to take advantage of.

9. Occasionally go for the splurge: While most meals are covered in full, Royal Resorts offers specialty food and drink items for a reasonable up-charge. For example, having the most incredible Steak Diane flambéed at our table was worth every penny of the \$9 surcharge. Two in our group also splurged on some pampering at the resort's spa. I was treated by my friends to an amazing hydrating facial (there are several one-hour facial and body work treatments offered at \$137 flat rate). Having a spa service also meant you could take advantage of the spa's hot tub, sauna and steam room anytime during the day/evening of your treatment.

10. Ask for what you want: On our first day, we noticed a beautiful photo display in the resort gift shop showing various families/couples/kids posing on the beach. We asked our concierge and were pleasantly surprised to find out that we, too, could have photos taken of our group for free, beachside — and that any we liked would cost us only \$14 each, and be provided in digital or print form. While I initially "pooh-poohed" the idea, the photo shoot only took about 15 minutes — the photographer had us doing everything from a Baywatch jog to jumping in the air — and the pictures turned out terrific, providing us with a beautiful memento of a fantastic experience.

Last but not least, don't forget the sun**screen:** That's not included, but most all-inclusive resorts, like the Royal Sands, do have an onsite mini-supermarket, lest you forget as you head out to soak up some much-desired rays.

Nicole Pensiero is a South Jersey resident and a member of the North American Travel Journalists Association (NATJA).

MUPPETS

FROM B5

everyone, from the puppeteers to the prop builders and electricians.

"His appreciation of people was beyond my range," says Goelz, who counts Gonzo, Bunson Honeydew and Boober Fraggle among his creations.

Outrageousness was always welcomed, Oz says, and kindness was king."All the sweetness came from Jim," Oz says.

The film includes archival footage of the late Muppet originator, along with clips of late writers and puppeteers, including Richard Hunt, who played Scooter and Janice on "The Muppet Show" and Don Music on "Sesame Street."

"Muppet Guys Talking" is dedicated to Nelson, who died shortly after filming his appearance in the documentary.

He and the other puppeteers said the greatest misconception about their work is that they're only responsible for the Muppets' voices.

"The voices are just 5 percent," Oz says.

That's why character backstories are so important. Because performers would often improvise during the creative process, knowing Miss Piggy's or Gonzo's motivations would help inform their reactions in any given scene.

It was improv that led Gonzo to have a thing for chickens, Goelz says in the film.

The physical work involved with making Muppets come to life is also highly specialized. Not only do the puppeteers need to translate their performances into puppets high above their heads, they need to do so with awareness of their fellow performers and of the camera positions capturing the

Brill's height presented a challenge when she first joined the Muppet cast: She's nearly a foot shorter than Oz and the other artists. Set workers created a pair of super-tall platform boots so Brill's arm, and the puppet on top of it, would match the guys'. The film includes an illustration of her makeshift

Considering the impact and popularity

of the Muppets at their height in the early 1980s, it's surprising there aren't more documentaries about the making of the phenom-

Brill said that in the Muppets' early days, Henson discouraged puppeteers from posing for photos with their characters to help suspend disbelief for young audiences. Oz still won't pose with any of his puppet personae, nor does he perform their voices.

He didn't even want to make "Muppet Guys Talking," but his wife, Victoria Labalme, insisted on it.

"She saw the way we worked, the culture that Jim created, and she had never seen that kind of work," Oz recalls. "She said, 'People should be aware that people can work like this — without backstabbing, without politics, but just working for the quality of the product.'

"She badgered me for about a year and I finally said OK."

Oz, too, distanced himself from his Muppet work when he transitioned to directing in 1982. He said he planned to give himself 10 years to learn the craft, but Henson expedited that when he tapped Oz to co-direct "The Dark Crystal."

Oz's other directing credits include "Little Shop of Horrors," "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," "What About Bob?" and "Bowfinger."

"Eventually people saw me as a director, and then I could really appreciate the Muppets part of me," he says. "That I was safe enough that I wasn't labeled as one thing."

Now Oz says he misses puppeteering. Apart from reprising his appearance as Yoda in "Star Wars: The Last Jedi," he hasn't performed with a puppet for more than a decade.

"No one asks me anymore," he says.

Besides, he adds, there was something truly special about Henson's Muppet environment, where the characters and the people creating them were all equally close.

"These characters are believable because our relationship down below is believable and real," Oz says. "The actual humor and the heart, it doesn't come from the puppets. It comes from the people underneath who've been working with each other for so many



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