

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 smack-dab 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 flam-béed 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) 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

