

TRAVEL

Cancún with kids

A toddler dad replaces a canceled, kid-free trip with a break to a child-friendly all-inclusive — and discovers how to have a real vacation along the way

By ANDREW SESSA





GARZA BLANCA IN CANCÚN IS A GREAT PLACE TO BRING THE KIDS.

“Daddy, daddy, throw me again, again!” I stand up in the waist-deep water of a massive swimming pool, feel the strong Caribbean sun on my winter-weary shoulders, and lift my breathless 4-year-old son high over my head. I toss him forward, his tiny toes grazing the top of the water, as he flies through the air toward my husband. He splashes down and, then, thanks to his floatie — if not quite to his whopping four sessions of swim lessons — he pops right back up. He’s gasping a touch but gleeful. “Now you, Papa,” he squeals. “You throw me. Throw me back to Daddy.”

It’s nearing dinnertime, and we’ve been at this for much of the three hours since we landed at the airport in Cancún, my husband and I stealing glances at each other, and at the turquoise Caribbean, the beachside palapas — and, I’ll admit it, at the bar — as

we launch our little guy back and forth between us. The kid acts like he’s never felt warm water, or the heat of the sun, for that matter, and we can hardly blame him.

It’s been a very long, very omicron winter back home in Boston. And thanks to the pandemic, which has lasted for half of our young son’s lifetime, it’s been a long time since we’ve been practically anywhere, let alone someplace this close to the equator. (“Palm trees grow so well here!” he marvels as we drive from the airport to the resort.)

We’ve come to Cancún — on a spring break holiday with friends who also have a young son — to try to remember what vacation is. That’s a vague memory mostly because of COVID, but also thanks to parenthood. As they say, after you have kids, you’ll take trips, but you won’t get a vacation.

Pre-COVID, Brian and I planned to come

to this part of the world, leaving our son with family at home, to celebrate a milestone birthday. The pandemic required us to cancel that trip, to an adults-only boutique retreat in Tulum, and as I started planning this much family-friendlier version, with a toddler who’s not exactly used to travel — or to hotels, or to anything resembling downtime — I had trouble letting go of my now two-year-old hopes and dreams of complete, child-free relaxation: The fantasy of just doing absolutely and totally nothing, with no appointments, zero responsibilities, no need to do anything but show up to breakfast for the chilaquiles (oh, how I dreamed of the chilaquiles) and then laze away my days on the beach.

As I researched resorts for this trip, this maybe-vacation, I found I had something of a Goldilocks problem. I rejected one set of



THE POOL IS NEVER OVERCROWDED.



GARZA BLANCA'S 452 SUITES HAVE PRIVATE TERRACES, MOST OFFERING OCEAN VIEWS.

places as too family-focused (all waterparks and garishly colored bells and whistles), another set as too grown up (which mostly meant they just didn't allow children). Eventually, I came across the newly opened Garza Blanca Cancún, from the Mexican-owned hospitality company TAFER. It seemed like it might fit just right.

Overlooking the Caribbean and lush mangroves from its perch on a recently developed stretch of sand just northeast of Cancún, the mod-looking, luxe-leaning retreat checked almost all our boxes. There was direct access to a sandy, palm tree dotted beach for castle-building and chaise-lounging; 10 sea-view pools and hot tubs, including a shaded, kid-friendly splash pad and an adults-only rooftop infinity-edge one; a half dozen or so food and drink venues, each with different cuisine and most

with outdoor seating, plus room service; and relatively wallet-friendly all-suite accommodations.

Garza Blanca also has a drop-in kids club, plus reserve-ahead babysitting services, promising plenty of adult time if — and when — we needed it. Choosing the resort's all-inclusive option meant we wouldn't torture ourselves doing the math whenever we found ourselves ordering "Oh, just one more, why not?" poolside margarita, or every time a child's breakfast buffet or room service meal went barely eaten.

Early in our trip, we discover that staying at a 400-plus-room resort with kids who wake up every day by 7 a.m., and often much, much earlier, has its advantages. We get outside hours before the sun feels too strong and enjoy our pick of outdoor tables at breakfast. We don't have to hurry to reserve a

chaise lounge — to the resort's credit, the pools and beach never feel crowded — and the sunrise views from our balcony aren't bad, either.

By day two, you can find me swimming laps uninterrupted, Brian reading quietly in the shade of an umbrella, our friends hanging out high above it all on the rooftop. Every so often, someone from the hotel comes around and asks if we need anything: a drink, a snack, a fresh towel, a dinner reservation, an appointment at the spacious spa, with its Natura Bisse salves and hydrotherapy circuit. Often, we do — and we find that if you ask for a beer, they may bring you a bucket of six — but just as often we don't. Still, what a joy, what a break, just to be asked.

As for the children ... What children? Oh, our children! They're at the Kids Club. And no one is mad about it. They get a break from the sun, and we all get a break from each other. They make rainbow streamers and shark crafts, practice yoga and get their faces painted — and the time we spend together is, I think, all the sweeter for the two or three hours a day we spend apart.

Though we indulge in the great outdoors as much as we can during our six-day stay, we also take plenty of advantage of our ocean-view, apartment-style suite. Its two king bedrooms each have space for a twin-size cot — keeping the kids close but not actually in our beds. And the living area in between (with full kitchen and washer-dryer) lets us have adult hangouts after early toddler bedtimes. Great for both grown-ups and kids is the large terrace, accessible through huge sliding walls of glass and furnished with macrame hammocks, soft seating and a dining area. As for the three bathrooms featuring high-tech toilets with heated seats, they provide endless amusement for our little guys.

If our kids were bigger, we might have left the property on a half-day catamaran trip to nearby Isla Mujeres, for snorkeling and a beach that lets you wade out for hundreds of feet, or headed to Chichen Itza or gone swimming in the cenotes. Or, if we were less precious about their 7 p.m. bedtime, we could have booked a pirate ship dinner cruise on a replica Spanish galleon.

But sitting on the beach with the kids, digging for spiraling Caribbean shells, spotting green coconuts high in the trees, and then wading with them in the bathwater-warm sea, it's hard for me to believe we're missing out on much. Even just seeing new plants and animals and trying new food together — or tossing the boys back



A STUNNING BALCONY VIEW

KID-FRIENDLY STAYS

Part of a recent, and still cresting, wave of new luxury resorts in the Mexican Caribbean that aim to cater to families with young children without sacrificing the adult pleasures of a high-end vacation, Garza Blanca joins Auberge and Conrad properties that have arrived here, with a Waldorf-Astoria and a St. Regis on the way. Longer-standing spots, like the Andaz, Rosewood, and Fairmont at the Mayan Riviera's Mayakoba development, have updates and additions that help them skew family-friendlier, too.

GARZA BLANCA

This months-old resort balances family friendliness with grown-up luxury. The 452 suites have private terraces, most offering ocean views, and anything bigger than a junior suite has a kitchen or kitchenette. All-inclusive rates gives you virtually unfettered access to the array of food and drink venues (plus room service), including the dry-aged rib-eye at the steakhouse and Don Julio at the bars. A kids club provides different activities every hour, and babysitters can be booked from \$15 an hour. While the kids play, parents should check out the adult-only roof top's infinity-edge pool and the spa's hydrotherapy circuit and Natrua Bisse treatments. *All inclusive rates from \$289 per person per night, cancun.garza blanca.com*

ANDAZ MAYAKOBA

Originally opened in late 2016, this 214-room resort recently expanded their kids club offerings with a program for 3-month- to 4-year-olds, and they've added an all-inclusive booking option. Kids younger than 5



GARZA BLANCA'S ALL-INCLUSIVE RATES INCLUDE ROOM SERVICE.

eat free; and those 5 to 11 for 50 percent off. *From \$299, double occupancy, andazmayakoba.com*

CONRAD TULUM

The kids club at this new resort puts a focus on nature, scheduling jungle tours and sandcastle sessions in addition to indoor activities. Set on a secluded, shallow, swimmable bay, the 349-room resort can arrange CPR- and water-safety-certified sitters through a third party and can organize custom, child-friendly off-site excursions. *From \$495, double occupancy, hilton.com/conrad-tulum*

ETÉREO

The 5-month-old, 75-room Mayan Riviera resort from Auberge Resorts — whose chairman is Houston businessman Dan Friedkin — offers a kids club with daily-changing local themes (Mayan and Mexican Day, for example), babysitting, children's menus at three restaurants and a host of immersive, largely aquatic and archaeological experiences for older kids. *From \$663, double occupancy,*

aubergeresorts.com/etereo

FAIRMONT MAYAKOBA

With a fleet of newly renovated public areas and accommodations (including family-friendly Casita Suites), this 15-year-old stay has a kids club for 5- to 11-year-olds plus pop-up teen camps during certain periods. There's also baby gear aplenty available, and little ones younger than 5 eat free. *From \$294, double occupancy, fairmont.com/mayakoba-riviera-maya*

ROSEWOOD MAYAKOBA

In February, the ultra-luxe resort set on crystal-clear mangrove-ringed lagoons and sandy seaside debuted its first beachfront residence: With six bedrooms, a 92-foot private pool and ocean views, the fully staffed Founder's Villa is just the thing for two or three high-flying families traveling together, or a multigenerational family reunion. And don't miss the kids club, hosted near the resort's family-friendly pool. *From \$750, double occupancy, rosewoodmayakoba.com*

and forth, back and forth, again and again and again, in all those different pools — feels like everything we could possibly need.

We are warm, we are together, we are free. We are, it turns out, on vacation.

On our last full day, one of the resort's beach attendants asks our son which he likes better, Boston or Cancún. He says Cancún — even without knowing we're in for a last gasp of sub-freezing winter weather when we get home.

"There are fun beaches, and I love the hotel, and things are happening quiet and loud all the time," he explains. "And Cancún has lots of sand, and that's why I love it here."

Later, he watches big kids playing volleyball on the beach and exploring the resort's huge inflatable waterpark, and I imagine a return when he's older.

The sun rises into gray skies after a night of rain on the morning of our flight back home, making departure easier at least psychologically if not logistically. (Packing up two toddlers and four adults after six days of sand and sun can zap your Zen sense of bliss pretty rapidly.)

Watching the day break from the balcony, our son says, "I'm glad we're going home, but I'm going to miss vacation," and he keeps asking when we'll come back.

We dodge his questions without really looking up, our heads in the suitcases we're stuffing with dirty laundry. When we do glance over at him, though, he's dancing on the terrace, looking out at the pools, imagining, we imagine, the fun he'll have when we return.