



SHUNNING THE ALL-INCLUSIVE STIGMA: THE ROYAL HIDEAWAY PLAYACAR

By Aly Walansky

Despite their popularity, all-inclusive resorts carry a certain underlying stigma. They are thought to be cheap, with overcrowded buffets (of mediocre food), watered down cocktails, and underwhelming accommodations.

For that reason, the market often likes to distance themselves from the terminology, or apologize for their own adherence to it. And then, every so often you come across a fabulous all-inclusive resort and you realize – it's absolutely not a dirty phrase.

Recently, I visited the Royal Hideaway Playacar in Riviera Maya, Mexico. It is, indeed, an all-inclusive: for one set price, you get unlimited food, drink, and many activities. But from the start, I knew it wasn't going to be like all the others—it's also one of only a handful of AAA 5 Diamond Hotels in Mexico.

So, I arrived, and there it was – situated on hundreds of feet of beachfront (they actually recently benefited from a huge beach rebuild project launched by the Mexican Government.) But, let's face it, many resorts of Mexico are on gorgeous beaches and within view of fabulous ruins – this is Riviera Maya, after all.

But then the uniqueness came in. Royal Hideaway Playacar

is the world's first and only all-inclusive AAA 5-Diamond Award resort, and it's made obvious from little details like villas with personal concierge service, an amazing spa, and first-class dining the whole way through.

While there, I had the "arduous" task of reviewing the food, and thus made the point of visiting all the restaurants on the resort premises. The crowning glory was the Chef's Table at its signature restaurant, Las Ventanas. This made me feel as if I was on *Iron Chef* and in a five-star restaurant, all at the same time.

It's essentially a very personalized dining journey where one table of guests (in our case, it was an intimate group of four), interacts with the executive chef and his team while he crafts a unique 7-course tasting menu created just for them. It's all very exclusive, and began with the sexy Chef Raul Vaqueurizo, Royal Hideaway Playacar's executive chef, and his team greeting us before they prepared a litany of amazing tasting dishes – each with a wine pairing! The menu changes each week, and none of the dishes are available to anyone else in the resort.

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It all is very technological, the chef will wear a headset and use a Webcam as he and his team prepare each dish, and be seen and heard while preparing each dish. After the meal, we got to go into resort history as we received a commemorative copy of the menu and signed the guest book.

Chef Raul is no joke. He has been named one of the top chefs in all of Mexico and “Cocinero del Año” or top chef of the year in the state of Quintana Roo, has more than 15 years of culinary experience throughout Europe and the Caribbean. Plus, well, he’s sort of hot.

“The Chef’s Table is a culinary adventure for the guests and for my team,” said Raul Vaquerizo, Royal Hideaway Playacar’s executive chef. “We look forward to creating a delectable new menu each week, exploring new recipes and demonstrating our culinary skills for each guest.”

Fabulously elegant dining isn’t the end of the spectrum – though every night, the meal was unparalleled – but it’s the attention to detail. It being adults-only does not hurt. How quickly can your holiday be ruined by spring breakers or crying children? But here you enjoy details like having your name monogrammed on your toilet paper (I’m not kidding), and a hydro-massage bath drawn for you in your room (with rose petals!) upon arrival.

So, when you are eating wild sea bass and drinking fabulous cocktails every night, you may soon begin to think this is the way it is across the all-inclusive resorts of the world. It’s not. Just weeks before, I had visited a family-friendly resort in Cancun that served buffet-style undercooked burgers and pizza. There was not so much as decent guacamole in site. Very often “unlimited” equals cheap – but it doesn’t have to, and this resort is proof of that. At Royal Holiday, I was eating fancy custom-omelets at breakfast, and had my choice of regional delights at lunch – or free room service any time I wanted! In their case, all-inclusive means exactly that.

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So, when you are considering going for an all-inclusive vacation – and there are a lot of benefits to it – what should you look for? There's a lot of logistics involved, but thinking them out can lead to a much-improved vacation experience.

FAMILY VS. ADULTS-ONLY

I've recently been to two separate adults-only all-inclusive – Rendezvous St. Lucia and Royal Hideaway Playacar. I truly believe that if you are not family-minded, this can be a vastly improved experience. The adults-only resorts are most appealing to the romantics, obviously – great for honeymoons, too. Watch out though, if you are jaded and single, rose petals in your bathtub and heart-shaped brownies upon your bed may ruin your evening.

ARE THEY BUDGET-FRIENDLY?

Compare prices. Rendezvous St. Lucia was surprisingly affordable, and Royal Hideaway has great deals if you book at the right time. It's very much like planning any other vacation – and often they will build in costs like airfare and transfers. It's a relief to know that you have had all your expenses covered before you go, and with all-inclusive, you can go for drinks and dinner without so much as carrying your wallet.

ARE WE LOOKING FOR A SPA VACATION OR A MORE LIVELY RESORT WITH AN ABUNDANCE OF ENTERTAINMENT?

You should search for what most appeals to your unique interests. For instance, if you want luxury and indulgence, but also relaxation and wellness, a choice like The Body Holiday at LeSport in St. Lucia may work for you – it's a top-rated spa and daily spa treatments are built into your fee. In Jamaica, Temptation Resort and Spa features adult-oriented games with a naughty flavor. And at Royal Hideaway in Playacar, you can take Spanish lessons by day, and drink tequila with the locals by night!

There are a lot of options to consider – whether you are a golfer, or a shopper, whether you want a vacation that you never leave the resort (that's me!), or one where you have the freedom to roam and see local sites. At Royal Holiday Playacar, we had the unique opportunity to be within a short drive of both a local shopping village and gorgeous Mayan ruins, as well as a great deal of upscale nightlife both on-resort and off. That was ideal for our group – but the ideal for your needs is out there!

It's your trip, and you have to make it all it can be for your own passion – so that you can return to your boring day job and at least have pictures and memories to look back upon. But all-inclusive is not a dirty word. It doesn't mean cheap, or less luxurious – it means see what inclusive includes. Then, be ready for that margarita in the sunshine.

All photos courtesy of Royal Hideaway Playacar

