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THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY'S TRUSTED VOICE

THESE KIDS CLUBS DON'T PLAY

Hotels and resorts are elevating the kids club experience, carving out welcoming spaces and developing engaging programming that delights parents and children alike.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

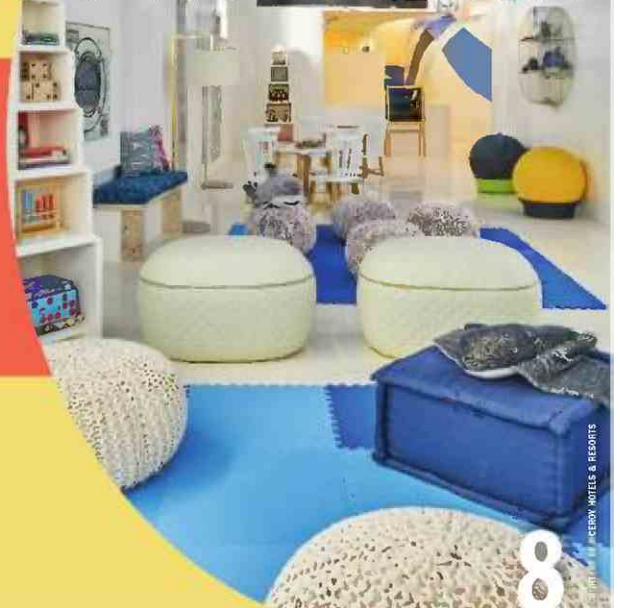


PHOTO: HOTELS & RESORTS

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Mexico was a pandemic-era favorite, but signs point to softened demand

By Nicole Edenedo

After years of strength during the pandemic, travel suppliers and sellers say that Mexico bookings softened this year as travel demand moved to long-haul destinations and cruises.

While the slump raised questions about whether there is some fatigue with the sun-and-sand staple that was so popular during the height of the pandemic, advisors and operators expressed confidence that the dip will be short lived and that Mexico will be back in 2024.

"Mexico's fatigued," said Jack Richards, CEO of Pleasant Holidays, who said

Mexico bookings are down double-digits this year. "From 2020 to 2021, during the pandemic, it was one of the few countries open for travel. People have been there, and they decided to go somewhere else in 2023. But it's not that concerning at this point for 2024. We'll be fine."

Hyatt Hotels Corp. CEO Mark Hoplamazian said earlier this month that the company's Apple Leisure Group (ALG) arm saw more "temperate" Cancun demand in the third quarter, as the destination reverted to more regular seasonal patterns after being a "go-to market" for much of the pandemic.

This was echoed at ALG Vacations' See MEXICO on Page 26

TRAVEL WEEKLY DATA ON ADVISOR INCOME

Ensemble talks ways to speed advisors' path to better wages

By Jamie Biesiada

LAS VEGAS — Ensemble president Michael Johnson, while on-stage during the consortium's Horizons 2023 event earlier this month at the Paris Hotel & Casino here, showed the audience a photo of his 6-year-old daughter.

But Johnson wasn't gunning for oohs and ahhs. With it, he shared a statistic

from Travel Weekly's upcoming Travel Industry Survey: It takes around 11 years for most advisors to achieve an income of \$60,000 or greater.

Taking that "shocking" fact into consideration, he said, if he started selling travel today, his daughter "would be driving a car and applying to university or college before I earned a decent wage. That is insane."

Indeed, the survey — of which Ensemble members got a preview ahead of its Nov. 20 publication — found that for many, the road to financial success can be long. See INCOME on Page 28

On the Record

IHG's Tom Rowntree on a coming transformation of InterContinental Hotels. **2**

Destination: Europe

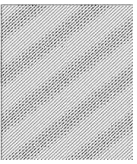
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COVER STORY

THESE KIDS CLUBS DON'T PLAY

Hotels and resorts are elevating the kids club experience, carving out welcoming spaces and developing engaging programming that delights children and parents alike.

The Montessori-inspired kids club facilities at the Castellafini resort in Tuscany.

BY CHRISTINA JELSKI

COURTESY OF CASTELAFINI

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In modern parenting terms, my kids — ages 2 and 5 — can best be described as “stage-five clingers.” The term, co-opted from “Wedding Crashers,” refers to those kids, like mine, who become a mess of tears and tantrums at the mere mention of a drop-off at a kids club when we travel.

Turns out, however, the problem wasn't my kids, but kids clubs in general.

This was a discovery I made very recently, during a hosted stay at the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay. The resort is as family-friendly as they come, and it has a lengthy list of kid-friendly amenities.

But its Umah Rare Kids Club is the cherry on top.

Walking through the club's stately gates, one is greeted by a spacious garden area with soft artificial turf underfoot and a small, shallow wading pool-slash-fountain off to one side. At another end is the garden's “slide pavilion,” a jungle gym-like structure crafted with bamboo and other natural materials.

Indoors, the club marries a modern, boho-chic aesthetic with more traditional Balinese-inspired design elements. The expansive space — made to feel even larger by its vaulted ceiling — is flooded with natural light, while its white walls, wood accents and earthy-hued murals create a relaxing vibe.

And then there were the toys. Countless toys, books and games lined the walls and shelves, and, notably, nary a piece of plastic, nor any type of screen, could be seen. (The Umah Rare Kids Club does in fact have a screen, but it's hidden from view in a smaller, upstairs loft area.)

From appearance alone, it's clear that this kids club is anything but ordinary.

On the day after arriving at the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay, my family and I decided to check out Umah Rare — or “house of children” — for the first time. It didn't take long for us to realize that even my extra-clingy kids would be unable to resist its charm, thanks in part to the incredible warmth of the club's staff, who, within minutes, had worked their magic and had my son

fully absorbed in a game of Chutes and Ladders.

Our visit also happened to align with that day's yoga session, led by a yoga instructor from the spa. To my surprise, my kids eagerly took to their mats, following the instructor as she moved from cat cow to downward dog to child's pose.

The even bigger surprise came the next day, when both children put up very little fight when we dropped them off at the club before taking off for several hours for dinner. (My daughter, too young to be dropped off at Umah Rare unattended, was put in the care of a babysitter.)

For my husband and I, who had never successfully handed off both children to strangers and enjoyed a kid-free meal while traveling, this small win felt like a triumph of epic proportions.

A good club makes a difference

And as it turns out, we're far from an outlier when it comes to realizing the difference a great kids club can make.

“Nowadays, things are much more of a collaborative effort in terms of how people vacation and plan trips with their children,” said Deb Swacker, an independent advisor with Avenue Two Travel. “It used to be that children were supposed to be seen and not heard. But that's just not true anymore. I mostly book families, and while it depends on the ages of the kids, having a good kids club is often very important.”

Swacker said she's seen a trend toward hotel and resorts creating more elevated and imaginative kids club spaces

and programming in an effort to attract discerning families.

She cited her family's own positive experiences at the Rosewood Mayakoba on Mexico's Riviera Maya, where her children participated in cooking classes, art sessions and lagoon ecotours. They even luxuriated at a pop-up kids spa.

“I have pictures of my children with cucumbers over their eyes, which was like the cutest thing I'd ever seen,” Swacker said.

She also pointed to Mexico's Chable Yucatan, which is in the process of adding a state-of-the-art kids club to its offerings, as another example.

On track to open by mid-2024, the Chable Yucatan's kids club will feature plenty of outdoor space, with a traditional Mayan farm where children can help grow vegetables. Other activities will include stargazing, theater, photography, pottery and weaving. The venue will also be home to the Corn Ceremonial Centre, a culinary hub where kids can learn about Mexican cuisine and try local dishes.

“What they're doing there is really cool,” Swacker said. “It won't just be a place where parents go to sort of ditch their kids. And when you have a kids club that's incredible and fun and has all this positive energy, kids don't feel like their parents are just trying to get rid of them.”

The Chable Yucatan also makes no mention of TVs or video game consoles.

“If a kids club does [have screens], I've seen them start to be relegated to, sort of, the back corner of the space,” Swacker said. “Kids clubs still have them, but they're definitely no longer the focus.”

Investing in facilities

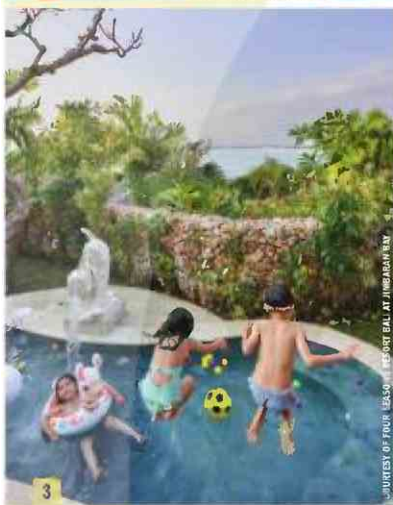
Other properties are also pouring significant capital into their kids club facilities.

All-inclusive heavyweight Club Med has made kids clubs a key focus of its model since it launched Children's Clubs in 1967. It has continued to prioritize their evolution and expansion in the years since.

Most recently, Club Med announced the addition of a dedicated Baby Club to its kids facilities at its Club Med Marrakech La Palmeraie resort, expected to open this December. Raphaëlle Chiapolino, Club Med's vice president of product marketing for Europe and Africa, said the Baby Club is designed to better cater to the growing number of “millennial families with young children” that have flocked to Marrakech.

“We are definitely seeing an increase in families traveling to the region,” said Chiapolino, who estimates that

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1) The kids club area at Viceroy Hotels & Resorts' Viceroy Los Cabos. 2) The interior of the Six Senses Ninh Van Bay's Vooc Village kids club, which opened in 2020. 3) A small wading pool/fountain for kids to cool off in at the Umah Rare Kids Club at the Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay. 4) The bright and airy interior of the Umah Rare Kids Club. 5) A rendering of the Chable Yucatan's Corn Ceremonial Centre, a culinary hub where kids will learn about Mexican cuisine and try local dishes. It is part of a kids club expected to open in 2024.

KIDS CLUBS

Continued from Page 2
 children account for around 21% of Club Med's travelers in Europe and Africa, an increase from 2019.

Amelie Brouhard, Club Med's vice president of marketing for North America and USA Sales, said the U.S. market is contributing to this boom in family travel.

"In the U.S., we are seeing more families with young children," she said, adding that around 41% of all U.S. guests visiting Club Med resorts are families.

Also responding to surging family travel demand is the Six Senses Ninh Van Bay, which in 2020 launched Vooc Village, a 5,300-plus-square-foot kids club named for the resort's langur monkey mascot. The resort's old club, according to Tuan Le, guest experience manager of the Six Senses Ninh Van Bay, was closer to 320 square feet.

The space is aptly named, offering kids plenty of space to monkey around outside at the club's jungle gym or its Aqua Gym splash area. Indoors, the activity lineup runs the gamut, including organic gardening, yoga, Little Mixologist and Junior Photographer classes. Spa-inspired programs are also in the mix here, with kids able to opt for a foot massage or herbal ball compress as well as participate in a "make your own body scrub" session.

For children willing to sample some of the local culture, other programming offers opportunities to learn traditional Vietnamese origami, Hoi An lantern making or how to play Vietnamese musical instruments.

And to ensure kids remain fully engaged, the kids club is a WiFi-free zone.

Le said there are 58 different activities, some offered daily and some weekly, which change every week. "This helps us to keep the kids from getting bored, even if they're returning each day," Le said.

Some of the center's more popular options include gardening and mixology, the latter of which involves a trip to a bar area at the property where the kids craft their own mocktails.

And just as the Six Senses Ninh Van Bay's adult guests are invited to mix and mingle at a weekly "guest gathering" cocktail event, a similar event is held for the resort's kids, who are invited to get to know one another over mocktails. "We call it the 'mini-guest gathering,'" Le said.

Elevated offerings

Putting a similarly sophisticated spin on the kids club concept is Viceroy Hotels, which rolled out its V Team Kids platform earlier this year.

"We really wanted to look at things from the kids' perspective and how can we make it more fun for them," said Kelly Kang, vice president of brand marketing at Viceroy Hotels & Resorts. "And we know kids are very passionate about projects; they want to feel empowered, and they want to learn new things."

The V Team Kids program runs not just across Viceroy properties with physical kids clubs — which include the Viceroy Los Cabos; Sugar Beach, A Viceroy Resort in St. Lucia; and the Viceroy Kopaonik Serbia — but also those without dedicated kids' spaces.

According to Kang, each V Team Kids activity is designed to fall under one of four "core pillars": creativity, community connection, exploration of the local terrain and, naturally, playfulness.

At the Viceroy Los Cabos, for example, Kang's children recently took a ceviche-making class. The property also offers kids Spanish classes and excursions to a nearby chocolate factory to learn the history of chocolate making or to participate in beachside baby turtle releases.

Culinary offerings are also a focus at sister property Viceroy Chicago, where a chef shows kids how a rooftop Community Beehive produces honey for the hotel, and at the Viceroy Santa Monica, which offers children the opportunity to make a pizza in a real pizza kitchen and serve their creations to their parents.

"Obviously, there's going to be diversity in terms of what kids want," Kang said. "But kids, and even their parents, want to have this sort of creative outlet when they're at our hotels. So, it's not just about leaving the kids, which they can, but it's also, how can we make activities for the whole family?"

Likewise, Tuscany's 2,700-acre Castelfalfi resort, part of Preferred Hotels & Resorts' Legend Collection, put renewed emphasis on families with the 2021 debut of its kids club, created with a heavy focus on the Montessori method of learning and design.

Ylenia Faillace, an executive with Castelfalfi, said the Montessori focus on hands-on experiences and harnessing kids' natural curiosity is incorporated into programming such as growing veggies in the club's garden and caring for chickens and rabbits at its dedicated "mini farm." A club kitchen gives kids the chance to try making traditional Tuscan recipes.

And for those occasions when parents are partaking in some Tuscan wine tasting with children in tow, Castelfalfi has a creative solution. While the grown-ups sip their wine, a special "blind" sensory game is arranged where kids guess the smell of various seasonal herbs and other ingredients, like truffle.

"We try to treat the kids just as we do the adults," said Faillace, adding that there are 40 indoor and outdoor experiences for adults. "We try to create as many different experiences as we can for the kids, too. Because we don't want them to feel 'less than' their parents."