

20 GREAT TIPS FROM
TRAVEL PROS

SAN JUAN'S SIZZLING
RESTAURANT SCENE

NASSAU WHERE
TO STAY AND PLAY

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HIDEAWAYS**

6 EASY AND EXOTIC ESCAPES

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COZUMEL

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BLUE-RIBBON
ALL-INCLUSIVE
RESORTS



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THE ART OF INDULGENCE
After taking the waters in the hydrotherapy pool (opposite), guests at Excellence Playa Mujeres can enjoy a seafood feast at The Lobster House.



All-inclusive resorts have always promised convenience and value. But these days, the finest of them also deliver excellence, whether you want to wind down or whoop it up, be pampered or push your limits.

FOR THE BIRTHDAY GIRL

Royal Hideaway Playacar, Riviera Maya, Mexico

Most birthdays include a cake — my wife's, however, routinely include airfare. As I researched sunny spots and swanky hotels fit for Joy's big day, I came across the Royal Hideaway Playacar on Mexico's Riviera Maya, the first adults-only, all-inclusive resort to receive the prestigious AAA Five Diamond Award. That distinction puts it in good company (Barbados' Sandy Lane, the Four Seasons in Nevis and the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman share the same accolade), and after a glowing recommendation by a discerning friend who's a New York City restaurant manager and part-time sommelier, the deal was sealed.

Travel snafus delayed our arrival until the wee hours of the morning, but we were nevertheless greeted warmly by a smiling bellman who took our bags and escorted us to the hotel's grand lobby, fragrant with eucalyptus and fresh flowers. Instantly we were served flutes of surprisingly good Mexican champagne, given lavender-scented cold towels, and after a brief orientation shown to our well-appointed villa — one of 11 two-story colonial-style accommodations, each with a private concierge. Joy loved the

his-and-hers bathroom sinks and the king-sized bed dressed in Egyptian cotton sheets. I appreciated the handsome furniture, sprawling outdoor terrace and well-stocked minibar that was refilled with my favorites each day. Our daily *Royal Journal* newsletter included a weather report, a list of the day's activities (Spanish lessons, tequila appreciation and towel sculpture

were a few of our favorites) and a nod to guests with something to celebrate: "Happy Birthday, Mrs. LaHuta!"

In the morning we were greeted by Ricardo, a cheery concierge who made dinner reservations at four of the hotel's six a-la-carte restaurants. Our options included an Italian bistro; a Pan-Asian spot; a Mexican and Caribbean eatery; and a continental restaurant, Las Ventanas, which features a four-course tasting menu of inventive dishes such as foie-gras soup with white garlic ice cream and fish with coconut and vindaloo curry. Every evening Joy and I would enjoy what we considered to be some of the finest restaurants we've ever eaten in without having to lift a finger to do research, make reservations or pay the check — elegant and effortless dining, indeed.

The rest of the hotel was equally impressive. There were spacious beachfront Bali beds, hot tubs galore and two massive pools flanked by teak chaises with hand-fluffed cushions. By day two, every waiter knew our names and what we drank — a level of service that pervaded the entire resort. There were no family reunions, no frat-party bar scenes and no screaming children. By the end of our stay we agreed that The Royal Hideaway felt exactly like a traditional luxury resort but with the

added convenience of having everything included — a sentiment echoed by many guests. "I knew it was going to be elegant," said Dave Adams, a first-time visitor from Provo, Utah, "but I didn't expect anything quite as luxurious as this."

Neither did we.

— David LaHuta

From \$300 in low season (\$500 high). * 800-999-9182; royalhideaway.com

*UNLESS NOTED, ALL RATES ARE PER PERSON PER NIGHT, BASED ON DOUBLE OCCUPANCY.

EDITORS' PICKS

Indulge as you unwind at these pampering, no-expense-spared getaways.

HERMITAGE BAY

ANTIGUA

268-562-8080; hermitagebay.com
The 25 contemporary cottage suites on this 140-acre property feature garden showers, private plunge pools, wraparound verandas and complimentary minibars. From \$700 per room in low season (\$900 high).

PALM ISLAND

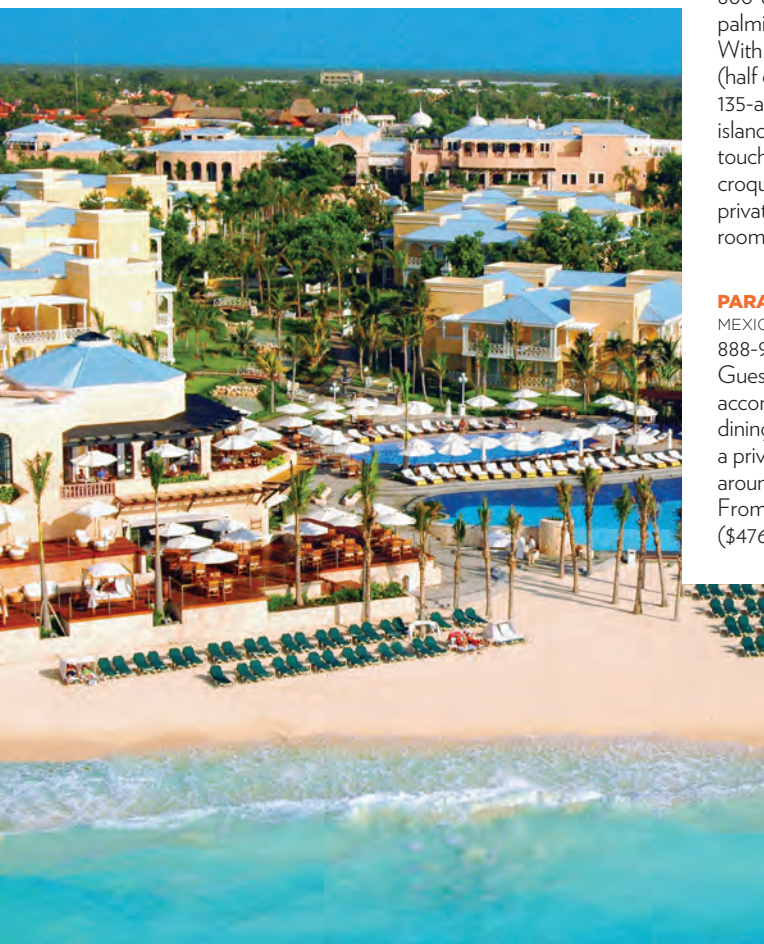
THE GRENADINES

800-858-4618; palmislandresortgrenadines.com
With only 42 rooms and suites (half of them beachfront), this 135-acre outpost delivers desert-island privacy with elegant touches such as afternoon tea and croquet, plus snorkeling off five private beaches. From \$725 per room in low season (\$855 high).

PARADISUS RESORTS

MEXICO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

888-956-3542; paradisus.com
Guests staying in Royal Service accommodations enjoy elegant dining in specialty restaurants, a private beach and pool, and around-the-clock butler service. From \$364 in low season (\$476 high).



THE ROYAL TREATMENT
Laid-back luxury at Royal Hideaway includes (clockwise from top) water's-edge Bali beds, six pools and a champagne welcome in the grand lobby.

LOBBY: MACDUFF EVERTON