

Finally - a high-end family resort in Cuba

Article and photography by Johanna Read, www.TravelEater.net

Cuba can be a bit of a dilemma. The beaches are gorgeous and the people are wonderful. But many resorts lack quality and services. While several new luxury resorts catering to couples have opened, there are very few places for families looking for an ultra all-inclusive holiday.

Enter Meliá's Family Concierge service. Family Concierge provides the same sophistication as Meliá's Paradisus resorts, but aimed at what a family needs and wants.

Meliá's first Family Concierge hotel will be fully up and running for winter 2016-17, at Meliá's gorgeous five-star Paradisus Varadero resort. Situated within Varadero's ecological reserve, the resort sits on a stunning long white crescent beach with calm waters perfect for young children.

Surrounding its own set of pools and restaurants is the exclusive Family Concierge section of the resort -- a hotel within a hotel.

Family Concierge caters to both the grown-up and not-so-grown-up members of your family. Adults will appreciate the gourmet dining (in-room too, at no additional cost), premium bar, and well-appointed rooms for the whole family (or connecting rooms if you'd like even more space). Butler service takes care of spa bookings, excursion arrangements and babysitting services. Still a rarity for Cuba, there's even free wifi in the rooms, so no need to trek to the lobby to send that one important email.

Family Concierge has different activity menus catered to babies, toddlers, kids and teenagers. Thoughtful touches include child-sized bathrobes, towels and slippers, and even cookies and milk with turndown service. Kids love the mini-buffet and juice bar in the restaurants with everything at their height.

Guests can even pack light, knowing that the complimentary express laundry service will take care of the inevitable spills and messes.

If you're not travelling with kids, Meliá's Paradisus Varadero is still a great resort to choose. Whether staying in the exclusive Royal Service section or elsewhere in the resort, the views, accommodations, food and service will certainly impress.

For those who prefer a luxury adults-only resort, you'll adore Meliá's Paradisus Princesa del Mar. Particularly ideal for scuba divers, Paradisus Cuba stays include a free daily one-tank dive and Meliá's Marina hotel (from which the dive boats depart) is right across the street.

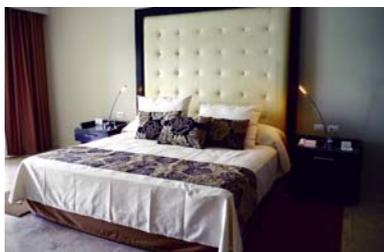
Paradisus Princesa del Mar is a beautiful resort with coveted Balinese beds surrounding its meandering pools. Staying in the impressive Royal Service section, guests have their own Balinese beds right outside their own private patio, with swim-up pool entry. Royal Service guests have exclusive access to two restaurants with cuisine to rival top hotels in any city in the world. All rooms at Paradisus Princesa del Mar are suites, and there are two beach sections with soft white sand and inviting gentle waves.

Meliá has hotels in Havana too, in case you want to add a little culture to your stay and see the UNESCO site of Old Havana in the capital.

Sunwing Airlines has Champagne Service flights to almost a dozen Cuban locations from cities all over Canada.

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Pristine Cayo Santa Maria

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After your Sunwing Airlines flight lands in Santa Clara, you drive north toward Cuba's coast. Soon you reach the first of 46 bridges over the shallow blue waters of the Cayos de Villa Clara section of the Jardines del Rey Archipelago. If your ideal Cuba vacation involves empty beaches and pristine sea life, Cayo Santa Maria is for you.

There are only a dozen hotels (for now) on Cayo Santa Maria. This part of the keys is a relatively new area of development in Cuba, and now is the time to go before the long sandy beaches become as packed with hotels as Varadero.

Meliá Buenavista is the most isolated of the dozen hotels on Cayo Santa Maria. Standing on the beach I could only see one hotel in the far distance on another island. It's a vigorous 45-minute walk on soft white sand to get to the nearest hotel.

Built on the edge of a mangrove forest, Meliá Buenavista is a quiet resort and is ideal if you want to commune with nature.

At each of the resort's three beaches, the fish were so friendly they swam up to check out my ankles as soon I entered the water. A school of sergeant majors followed me as I snorkeled off Playa La Duna, the longest of the three beaches. The visibility for snorkeling was best at the crescent beach near the resort's main pool. Almost completely sheltered from waves, you could see hundreds of urchins and fishes in the turtle grass.

Taking an eco-walk with Navy is an ideal way to learn about the Cayos. On my walk, I learned to differentiate between white and red mangrove, I barely recognized birds that summer in Canada due to their colour change, I saw barracuda and hound fish a few feet from shore, and even found an immense intact sand dollar. On the exterior walls of several hotel buildings, I saw the bright blue, green and scarlet Allison's anole lizard, looking almost like a cartoon.

Meliá Buenavista has just 105 rooms, and the feeling is of a luxury boutique hotel. There are activities from pool volleyball, to taichi, to salsa lessons, but the vibe is quiet and laid back. I loved my morning yoga

class under the thatched roof of a pavilion over the water.

The resort has three restaurants. Breakfast and lunch have small buffets of breads, charcuterie and fruits, with a focus on à la carte selections. Dinner is entirely à la carte. 24-hour room service is included at no extra cost. Should you tire of these choices, Meliá provides a free shuttle service for you to dine at either Meliá Las Dunas or Meliá Cayo Santa Maria, nearby.

Rooms are large, with a big bathtub and an outdoor shower, a walk-in closet and separate indoor and outdoor sitting areas.

As the whole hotel has The Level service, your butler will even pack your suitcase for you when it's time to catch your Sunwing flight home.

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