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Sun, Sand, Surf and a Pop Quiz

Kids Take a Working Vacation Studying Leaves, Tortoises and Mandarin; Mom and Dad Lounge Poolside

By ANDREA PETERSEN

For most people, a resort vacation means lounging on the beach and sipping tropical drinks by the pool. For Jillian Haversat, a recent trip to Florida also included biology lessons, pop quizzes and "no-talking-without-raising-your-hand" rules.

That's because Jillian, an 11-year-old from Guilford, Conn., was taking part in the Ritz-Carlton, Naples kids' program. In the program, "Nature's Wonders," participants wear mini lab coats and peer under microscopes to examine the cell structure of plants. Another activity teaches kids about the feeding habits of red-footed tortoises (Their favorite meal: cat food and worms.) Kids also play a version of "bingo" with words like "conifers" and "ornithology."

Hotel and resort kids' programs are becoming more lavish—and more overtly educational—particularly among high-end hotels. The programs, where parents can drop off their children for a few hours or even all day, used to include not much more than supervised swimming and the occasional Disney movie.

At the "Mini MO" clubs at Mandarin Oriental hotels, for example, an instructor teaches kids words and phrases in Mandarin. At Hyatt Corp.'s Hyatt Regency Scottsdale Resort and Spa at Gainey Ranch in Arizona, "Camp Hyatt" participants are given environmental lessons

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'They're learning something different. It isn't just babysitting.'

—Jennifer Hedrick, a guest at Ritz-Carlton, Naples



THE THREE R'S MEET R&R: At the Ritz-Carlton, Naples in Florida, Jillian Haversat, above, gets help from hotel naturalist Randy Sarton sifting for clams during a 'Nature's Wonders' program. Right, Bethany Latham looks through a microscope at leaves she collected. Parents, meanwhile, can relax by the pool, left.



Older Licensed for The Wall Street Journal ©

HOME & FAMILY

The Kids' Working Vacation as Grown-Ups Relax

Continued from the prior page with details about the resort's "aquatically balanced" lagoon pond and solar-energy initiatives. The kids' club has its own demonstration solar panel. Rosewood Hotel & Resorts' Little Dix Bay in the British Virgin Islands has a marine biologist on staff to teach in the "Children's Grove" program about the area's coral reef and marine life. At "AKA," the \$5 million-plus, 8,000 square-foot kids' club that Atlantis, Paradise Island (owned by Kerzner International Holdings Ltd.) in the Bahamas opened in December, kids get instruction on table etiquette while they learn to cook candy pizzas and molten cakes. The club also has everything from a performance stage with costume-strewn dressing rooms to a reading room with a talking tree.

The make-over of hotel kids' programs is being spurred, in part, by a generation of parents who want to make sure their offspring are engaged, learning—and getting an edge—even while on vacation. "It is the same philosophy as getting your kids into the best nursery school," says Vivian Deuschl, spokeswoman for Marriott International's Ritz-Carlton.

"They expect more than putting their kids in front of the TV set and watching cartoons." Also, today's parents are more likely to travel with their children—and seek out kid-friendly amenities. About 70% of leisure travelers belonging to Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1978) said they traveled with children on one or more leisure trips in 2009, according to a survey of 1,590 leisure travelers by market-research firms Ypartnership and Yankelovich Inc.

The added attention to kids' clubs is part of an overall strategy by hotel and resort companies to lure more leisure travelers. In the past couple of years as the economy has soured, business travel has fallen dramatically and some experts say it may be years before it comes back strongly. Leisure travel has also taken a hit, but is expected to recover sooner. Families, in particular, are attractive to hotels. They tend to stay longer, book more rooms and rack up higher bills at restaurants and other facilities because "packing up the kids to go out to dinner is



'Ranger Randy,' above, teaches (left to right) Bethany Latham, Abby Hedrick, Jacqueline Haversat and Nate Hedrick about alligators. While the kids are learning, Jennifer Hedrick, right, plays tennis. 'We just wanted a few hours for ourselves,' she says of the kids' programs.

a lot more trouble than ordering room service," says Bjorn Hanson, a hospitality professor at the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management at New York University.

Hotels say that a vibrant kids' program can drive repeat business, especially since kids are more involved these days in deciding where their families vacation. Hotels also hope that hooking kids will build their guest lists far into the future. "We want to engage them and make them Ritz-Carlton guests for life," says Darryll Adams, hotel manager at the Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort, Naples. Last month, this second outpost of the Ritz-Carlton, Naples launched a sister program to "Nature's Wonders" called "Eye Wonders," where space-themed activities include gazing at constellations through telescopes and using the sun's rays to make "solar s'mores."

It may not seem fair that kids are taking recycling lessons while mom and dad snooze or read *Us Weekly* by the pool. But the reality is that for most kids, lounging and napping is torture.



They want to do stuff all day. For parents, that can be exhausting. "We wanted a vacation, too. We just wanted a few hours for ourselves," says Jennifer Hedrick, a fitness-studio owner from Summit, N.J., who was vacationing at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples last month. While her children, Abby, 6, and Nate, 5, were at "Nature's Wonders," Ms. Hedrick took a tennis lesson. "We like that they are learning something different. It isn't just babysitting in the room," she says. This was the family's second year at the resort and Abby was a repeat participant at the kids' club.

If the new breed of kids' programs actually felt like school—albeit with palm trees—there would be a pint-sized revolt. The key, hotels say, is to make them hands-on: Think children's museum more than

lecture hall. "We call it 'edutainment,'" says Randy Sarton, the Ritz-Carlton, Naples' hotel naturalist and a former high school teacher who goes by "Ranger Randy." "At certain times we'll back off [the learning portion]. You have to let kids be kids."

"Nature's Wonders" looks like a mini aquarium: It has 11 tanks with about 100 fish and other sea critters. On a recent rainy Friday morning (the clubs are particularly popular in bad weather), seven children ranging in age from 5 to 10 joined for the "It's Critter Feeding Time" activity. After watching Mr. Sarton and other staff feed the center's tortoises, eel and a tank full of jellyfish, the kids took their turn. They scooped up bits of dried fish food and cut up pieces of shrimp and silver sides (There were a lot of exclamations of "eww" and "gross.") and

Vacation Vocations

Some hoteliers are touting programs for kids in hopes of wooing parents. Here's a sampling of what's available, but check local hotels for details.

HOTEL / COMPANY	OFFERINGS	PRICE
Atlantis, Paradise Island atlantis.com	AKA program includes cooking lessons, a stage and dressing rooms for performances and a Lego construction area.	\$75 to \$60 per session
Hyatt com.hyatt.com	Program is a partnership with National Geographic Kids. Many activities center around the environment and nature.	Varies by property.
Mandarin Oriental mandarinoriental.com	Mini MO programs are customized for each location. The program in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for example, shows kids how to farm a rice paddy.	Varies by property; complimentary at some resorts.
Ritz-Carlton ritzcarlton.com	Programs vary by location. Nature's Wonders and Eye Wonders programs at the Naples, Fla., properties focus on the sea and outer space.	In Naples, \$60 for a morning or afternoon session and \$110 for all day, including lunch.
Rosewood Hotels & Resorts rosewoodhotels.com	Children's Grove program at British Virgin Islands location, Rosewood Little Dix Bay, has marine-life studies.	Little Dix Bay program is free.

Source: WSJ reporting

dropped them into tanks.

"You can do dry or yucky stuff," said Mr. Sarton. "Who wants yucky?"

"I do," said Delaney Young, a 10-year-old from Stamford, Conn., while raising her hand.

Staff kept up a steady stream of information about the fish being fed and asked questions to see what the kids were retaining. While some hotel kids' programs are complimentary, most charge a fee. "Nature's Wonders" costs \$60 for either a morning or afternoon session, or \$110 for the day, including lunch.

"I thought it was cool and fun," says Delaney, who was on a spring-break vacation with her parents and two siblings. "We fed all the animals. I learned that eels aren't electric but everyone thinks they are."

Her mom, Cristina Young, says she "read a ton and napped," while the kids were at "Nature's Wonders."

Hotel companies say a robust kids' program is key for alleviating the parental guilt that can crop up around ditching offspring for a couple of hours. "What parents are really concerned with is, 'Are they having a good time and can I easily walk away and when I come back will they be happy,'" says Thomas Steinhauer, regional vice president and general manager at Four Seasons Resort Maui at Wailea. **Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts** offers a

complimentary "Kids for All Seasons" program at its resort properties.

Enrolling the kids in a program where they are learning something can also provide some cover to families who yank the kids out of school for a beach vacation. Indeed, the Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua in Hawaii created a 70-page slide presentation about the resort's "Ambassadors of the Environment" program that children can take to their teachers or use in a presentation for their classmates back home. One bit of the suggested speech about the program—which is a partnership with explorer Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ocean Futures Society—reads: "Like our cities, coral reefs have power plants, farms, recycling and waste-management systems and public-health professionals."

Parents can use the slide show to "justify their [kids'] gap in school," says Denise Naguib, corporate director, environmental programs at Ritz-Carlton. "Teachers want to know that kids aren't just skipping school."

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ONLINE TODAY: See photos from Nature's Wonders at the Ritz-Carlton, Naples and watch a video on how hotels are developing programs for kids at WSJ.com/Travel.