

Hotel Xcaret
Mexico is located in
Playa del Carmen.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

The challenge of planning a trip for multiple family members is made easy in Mexico's Riviera Maya.

By Casey Hatfield-Chiotti

WE WERE QUITE THE GROUP walking along a sliver of white crescent beach dotted with heaps of red algae and lapped by aquamarine waters. My father, still wiry and fit even though he had turned 70 the year before, walked ahead with our affable guide, Pascual. My husband and

pregnant sister were beside me as we waited for my 6-year-old son, Wylie, who scampered along the sand.

When we checked into **Hotel Esencia** (from \$1,570 a night; www.hotelesencia.com), 30 minutes northeast of Tulum, the concierge told us about the family of manatees

Hotel Esencia
(right and below)
is located between
Cancun and Tulum.

living in a cenote — the Yucatán Peninsula is known for the natural sinkholes exposing groundwater — near the hotel. It was possible to see the gentle marine mammals with a guide. Everyone else in our group had gone earlier in the week and told us how magical it was swimming with the creatures.

Pascual led us through an unused hotel property destroyed by Hurricane Wilma in 2005, next to Esencia; the jungle had reclaimed it with trees growing up through crumbling former hotel rooms. When we got to the lagoon, Pascual gave us snorkel gear and pulled out paddleboards from beside a wooden dock. We searched for the manatees in the calm blue water and looked below every tangle of mangrove.

"Sometimes the family goes out into the ocean," said Pascual apologetically. "Usually, the mom and the baby stay behind, but they don't seem to be here today."

We still had a packed itinerary and plenty to look forward to. My mom had started



talking about a multigenerational spring break trip to Mexico a year before. The planning would largely be left to me, the travel aficionado in the family, and I was nervous. My sisters and I had eight children between us; where would a group age 3 to 70 be entertained? We settled on the Caribbean coastline known as the Riviera Maya. While Cancun and Tulum have become more adult and nightlife-focused, resorts along the quieter stretch in between have made a conscious effort to welcome families with kids' clubs, complimentary children's meals, help with child care and large suites that can accommodate groups.





Two new properties offer refreshing takes on family-friendly hospitality. **Maroma, A Belmond Hotel** (from \$1,095 a night; www.belmond.com), reopened following a renovation in August on 200 acres of lush jungle along a silky white sand beach. It has just 72 rooms, villas and suites done up in local materials and artisanal patterns, like handwoven textiles from Oaxaca and traditional glazed Saltillo floor tiles from Guadalajara. The residential-style rooms, particularly the one- and two-bedroom beachfront suites with direct beach access, are comfortable for families, who can visit a sea turtle sanctuary, go snorkeling and stargaze — Maroma has been deemed an ideal place to stargaze by the United Nations World Tourism Organization. **Etéreo, Auberge Resorts Collection** (from \$999 a night; www.aubergeresorts.com), which opened in 2021, has a modern Mexican restaurant and a highly curated contemporary art collection, but it also has a club where kids can make sandcastles and piñatas and has two swimming pools.

Maroma (above and below) recently reopened after a renovation.

It's hard to imagine a hotel could be more family-accommodating than Hotel Esencia. The former home of an Italian duchess is understated and posh, but nothing felt too precious to touch. Kids could run on the wide lawns and splash in the family pool overlooking the Caribbean Sea. The property's wildlife: two resident peacocks, lizards sunning themselves on the grass, turtles living in a small cenote and coatis hopping through the trees endlessly entertained the children. Family-friendly events happen throughout the year, like the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner with a Mexican twist (think roast turkey with mole and apple tacos for dessert). Daily children's activities included mask decorating and jewelry making. The large suites slept four comfortably with two queen-size beds, and the hotel helped arrange sitters so we could enjoy a sushi dinner at Taiyo or grab a mezcal margarita in the hotel's speakeasy bar.

Still, the point of the trip was family time. We geared up for a full day at **Xel-Há** (www.xelha.com), a cenote water park 20 minutes from the hotel. In a





A guest room at
Etéreo, Auberge
Resorts Collection

lagoon beside the sea, and I was impressed by the sheer number of activities and the park's natural beauty. While we passed on swimming with dolphins, we were happy to snorkel in the lagoon, cliff jump, float through a mangrove forest and zip-line over the water. When the older kids decided they wanted to do the towering lighthouse waterslide, I took my 3-year-old — the only one too young to go — on an adventure through a tree obstacle course. We were all tired but ravenous that night, and we ate at Beefbar, Hotel Esencia's steakhouse beneath a giant palapa. After the kids devoured lobster tacos and brick-oven pizza, they built forts using pillows in the grass while the adults chitchatted over glasses of rosé and bourbon cocktails.

Later in the week, a small group decided to go on a day trip to UNESCO-protected **Chichén Itza** (www.chichenitza.com), the ruins of an ancient Mayan city that are Mexico's most-visited archaeological attraction, while others decided to stay at the hotel for spa treatments and more pool and ocean time. The key to planning a

successful multigenerational trip, it seemed, was setting up easy moments together but leaving enough room for spontaneity and exploring in smaller groups.

On our last morning at Esencia, we met Pascual at 8 a.m. As I paddled on the water again, I worried that a manatee sighting wasn't in the cards. Soon after, Pascual pointed at what looked like white spotted rocks below.

"That's the mom and the baby," he said in a hushed voice. He instructed us to put our snorkel gear on and slip into the water quietly. The manatees began swimming and we followed along. Pascual said it was all right to touch the baby — who was curious and friendly — if he was close enough. We watched as they dove down and swam back up to the surface with a swish of their fan-like tails. My father held his breath and dove as deep as they were. At one point, the baby swam close enough to my son so he could gently stroke its back. The manatees would forget us soon after we'd gone, but for our family, the outing was unforgettable.

MORE FAMILY FUN

Here are more ideas for a family-friendly Riviera Maya vacation, an area that will be even easier to explore when a new train route debuts in December.



A guest room at the Fairmont Mayacoba (left); a scenic spot at Hotel Xcaret Mexico (below)



01

The **Fairmont Mayakoba** (from \$255 a night; www.fairmont.com) has five palm-fringed pools, 10 dining venues with kids' menus (children 5 and under eat free, and kids 6 to 12 dine for half price), freshwater canals that families can tour by boat and 240 wild acres of mangrove forest teeming with exotic monkeys, coatis and macaws. The resort also puts on fun cultural events, such as Mexican fiestas and kids' carnivals.

02

While Chichén Itza gets all the attention, the Mayan ruins of **Coba**, 45 minutes northwest of Tulum, are equally interesting. With a fraction of the visitors, it's easier for families to explore, and there are bikes and rickshaws to rent so the whole gang can see impressive pyramids and other sites without hearing the dreaded "Are we there yet?" The local cenotes are fun to explore, too.

03

The luxurious **Rosewood Mayakoba** (from \$1,309 a night; www.rosewoodhotels.com) resort, built along winding lagoons and a mile-long arc of beach, has renovated suites with plunge pools, butler service and garden showers. Kids can also participate in Rosewood Explorers, a children's program where daily activities include yoga, eco boat tours with a biologist, scavenger hunts and Spanish lessons.

04

At all-inclusive **Hotel Xcaret Mexico** (from \$830 a night; www.hotelxcaret.com), a large resort in Playa del Carmen, there's a watery playground that has a kids' pool with octopus-shaped slides, a waterfall and a small rock-climbing wall. Families can play together in the Family Club with pool tables, a mini-soccer table and air hockey.

05

The expansive **Xcaret** (www.xcaret.com) nature park is part zoo, part cultural attraction. Families can swim in underground rivers, pet sharks and see Mayan ruins.