

Condé Nast Traveler

TRUTH IN TRAVEL // DECEMBER 2013

NOT HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

*THE (UN) TOURIST
GUIDE TO NYC
LAST-MINUTE
NEW YEAR'S GETAWAYS*

A man and a woman are seated in ornate green velvet chairs with gold trim, facing each other at a small round table. The table is set with a white tea service and a vase of red flowers. Behind them, several colorful shopping bags are stacked on a side table. The setting is a bright, elegant hotel lobby with large windows and gold curtains.

 GIFT
GIVING
ON
THE GO

Tea for two at The Plaza
hotel's Champagne
Bar in New York City.

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THE ART OF CHILLING

Lisa Rubisch, with family in tow, makes a compelling case for doing absolutely nothing while on holiday on Mexico's Riviera Maya

There's plenty to see and do around Esencia Estate, just outside Playa del Carmen, but with only 29 rooms on 50 beachfront acres, it's likely you'll never leave the property.

WALKING DOWN the beach in Playa del Carmen this past spring, Beckett, my six-year-old son, bounded toward an elaborate sand castle. "Don't knock it down!" I cried in unison with the sand-sculptors' mother, who was sitting under an umbrella nearby. Disaster averted, we chatted about our vacations while our kids played in the sand.

"Have you made it to the ruins?" she asked. "Or the nature preserve?"

"No," I said, "we haven't."

"Snorkeling?" I shook my head. "You must have gone to Tulum?" Uh, no. What *had* I done in the past six days? I'd parked myself on a towel and drunk *micheladas* with my husband. I'd licked melting ice cream off my fingers. I'd played a game with my boys—Beckett and his nine-year-old brother, Owen—that

we call Crabby Crabs, where we pretended to be disgruntled hermit crabs, creeping across the swimming pool. "We've pretty much done nothing," I told her.

What Ambitious Sand Castle Mom didn't know is that my family and I hadn't had a vacation in years. I travel almost half the year directing TV commercials, shuttling constantly from our home in New York to Los Angeles and Europe. Staying home has always been the prize. My last real vacation, embarrassingly, was my honeymoon, a decade ago. Here, on one of the most beautiful stretches of the Riviera Maya, we came to chill, not conquer. And, luckily for us, we found just the spot to do it: the Esencia Estate.

The former villa of an Italian duchess turned small and irresistibly charming boutique hotel,

Even small fry live large at Esencia, where the guest rooms are stocked with kid-size robes and flip-flops.

Esencia is set on 50 lush acres, with narrow pathways linking adobe-walled cottages and Mayan-inspired thatched huts to sugary white sands and the azure sea. Xpu-Ha, the hotel's idyllic beach, stretches for two miles. The minute we arrived, we knew we wouldn't want to leave.

There's an unfussy luxury to every aspect of the property. Rooms, just 29 in total, are spacious and lovely, but so simply designed—with thick whitewashed walls, glazed concrete floors, and sturdy built-in furniture—that I never fretted about breaking precious antiques or plopping our wet bathing suits over the window ledge. We always felt perfectly at home, which I rarely do at fancy hotels. Better than home, actually. Never in my adult life have I felt as deeply taken care of as I did by Esencia's staff. It was as if we were all in the hands of a team of loving *abuelas* whose primary goal was to make sure that we were well rested and well fed.

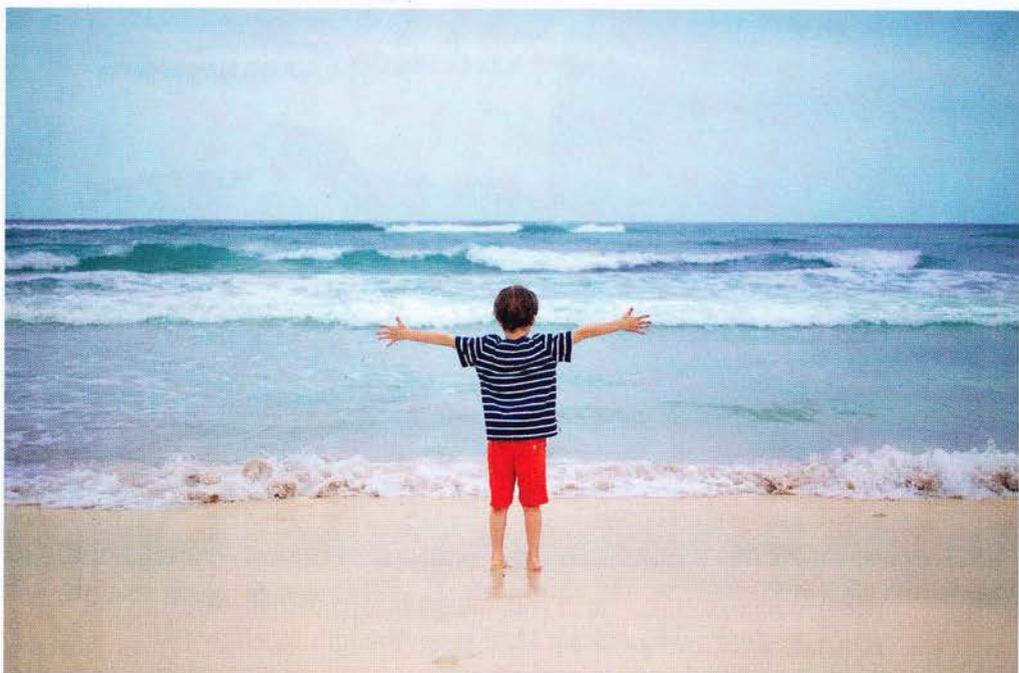
And well fed we were. Every morning, hot coffee, hot chocolate, and warm pastries were left outside our door. At lunch, we pored over an extensive seviche menu and waited eagerly for the homemade tortillas—patted, rolled, and griddled right in front of us, poolside. Dinners were served in a candlelit palapa, where my kids, ordinarily picky eaters, ate heartily, while my husband and I became addicted to the jalapeño appetizer, stuffed with shrimp and goat cheese, devoured with sips of good tequila.

We immediately fell into a happy routine. Lazy mornings in our room (the hotel offers an 8 A.M. yoga class, but I never seemed to make it there)



followed by a visit to one of the hotel's two pools, then the other, then the beach. After we had our fill of sun and sand, the boys and I would head to the spa and slip into the hot tub, a delicious little hideaway set back into the jungle. After dinner, we'd return to our room to find a different type of incense—cinnamon, sage, orange, or lavender—burning softly on the bedside table.

But each day also brought delightful surprises. First there was the unannounced cookie-decorating party for the kids, with delicate sugar cookies and cream puffs, bowls of brightly colored icing, melted chocolate, and pastry bags full of chantilly cream. We worked on our masterpieces while curious iguanas looked on. Another night, a mariachi band rocked out in the moonlight as guests sipped expertly mixed margaritas—icy, strong, and not too sweet. Not everything was perfect—like the day strong winds threatened to spoil the hotel's weekend barbecue—but we stayed the course, laughing at ourselves for wearing our winter parkas as we stood feet from the Caribbean, holding tight to our plates (piled high with pork kebabs and fresh



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA RUBISCH



One of the finest strands in the Yucatán, Xpu-Ha beach fronts the hotel. Just beyond the white sands lies the world's second-largest barrier reef.

pineapple) lest they blow away.

The best surprise, however, came toward the end of the trip, when it finally dawned on me that vacations are not the frivolous extravagance I thought them to be; that thing that other people do. Vacations are an essential time of year when you turn off your phone and snap your computer shut like you mean it. It's that precious week—or better yet two—devoted entirely to you, your spouse, and your children, where doing absolutely nothing magically becomes the most fun you've ever had.

At checkout, we were asked to sign the Esencia guest book. While my husband collected our bags, Owen and I scribbled our farewells and thank-yous, and then Beckett took up an entire page with a pictorial love letter. He drew palm trees, the mariachi band, himself, and the sea. "When I grow up, I'm moving to Esencia," he wrote. "These are my people. This was the best time I had in my entire life." Not so fast, Beckett. You don't know what next year's vacation will bring (52-984-873-4830; doubles from \$545). □

FAMILY, IN MOTION

Want something a little more active? Here's what to do

In the unlikely event you and your brood tire of building sand castles on Esencia's beach, Xpu-Ha, try **Akumal**, another stretch of calm white sand eight miles south. The area's other superlative strand is at **Tulum**, below limestone cliffs crowned by the eponymous thirteenth-century Mayan ruin—go when it opens, at 8 A.M., to avoid the tourist crush. Closer to town, you'll find excellent restaurants and bars: Leave the kids with Esencia's babysitters and drink cocktails under twinkly lamps at **Casa Jaguar** (Carretera Tulum Boca Paila 7.5KM; 52-1-998-222-2749; entrées from \$13); go loca-

vore at **Hartwood**, where a former Brooklynite chef tends to the wood-fired oven (Carretera Tulum Boca Paila 7.6KM; no phone; entrées from \$17); and party at **Papaya Playa Project**, a popular pop-up hotel and beach club (52-1-984-116-3774; doubles from \$105). The Riviera Maya also has plenty to offer active types. Turtles, manta rays, dolphins, and numerous striped and spotted tropical fish patrol the **Mesoamerican Barrier Reef**, the world's second largest; Esencia can arrange snorkeling and scuba diving trips. Pack a picnic and take the fam swimming in a cenote, or sinkhole—the Yucatán Peninsula has as

many as an Emmentaler cheese. The Mayans cast sacrificial offerings into many of them, but don't let that put you off—leaping into the sparkling, creeper-draped water is a unique and thrilling experience. **Cenote Dos Ojos** ("Two Eyes") is 12 miles north of Tulum on Highway 307. Alternatively, guarantee your whole family a full night's sleep by engaging in multiple activities in a single day: The **Hidden Worlds Ultimate Adventure** experience, bookable through Esencia, comprises zip-lining and sky-cycling through the jungle, cavern rappelling, and cave snorkeling. —KATE MAXWELL

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