

Just the two of us

Spend precious ‘us’ time together with your child on a holiday à deux.
Eleanor Mills and daughter Alice try the one-on-one experiment in Mexico

Eleanor Mills Published: 7 December 2014

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Dream team: snorkelling in the Caribbean (btrenkel/Getty)

Parenting books are full of the benefits of spending one-on-one time with your children. Numerous friends have told me how wonderful it was to go on a trip with just one child — for the bonding, the fun, the laying down of memories. So, when my two daughters’ autumn half-terms failed to coincide, it seemed a perfect excuse for me and my eldest to take that oft-promised Big Girl trip. Dad and the youngest stayed behind, assuaged by promises of their own special breaks in the future.

Alice, 12, deserved a treat. She’d just started at her new secondary school, where she arrived not knowing a soul. By half-term, she was exhausted. Our “summer” holiday had been spent surfing in Devon, where we hit a hurricane, not a heatwave (average temperature 16C). Sunshine was in order.

We are both keen snorkellers, and I fancied some rejuvenating — and bonding — yoga and spa action. It being nearly November, that was going to involve a long flight. As twentysomething, I had travelled around Central America, structuring my trip round the Mayan sites, and fell in love with the Caribbean coast of Mexico. To my mind, the beaches are more white, more turquoise, more idyllic, than those on any of the Caribbean islands, and it has far less of a visitor/local apartheid, and more culture. I liked the idea of retracing the odd step from my backpacker days with Alice in tow — so we boarded a direct flight to Cancun and our first bonding stop, the Belmond Maroma Resort & Spa.



Alice conquering a Mayan pyramid at Coba

I wasn't quite sure what a holiday with only half the family — and without my favourite adult playmate — would be like. For the first few days, it felt weird to be two, not four. The others missed us,

too. But then we began to enjoy it. We are both avid readers, and with no nine-year-old little sister insisting “Play with me!” every few seconds, we notched up some serious Kindle hours. In fact, I haven't had such a relaxing holiday since before the kids were born.

The days seemed endless — partly thanks to the jet lag, which meant we were wide awake long before dawn. By 4am, we were up and puffing away together on a cross-trainer, giggling at how we were human hamsters on a wheel. We would then plunge into our suite's private pool, scoffing free chocs while we soaked in the warm water.

When the sun finally rose, we greeted it in the sea, bobbing over silken waves as the water turned from black to purple to coral and finally turquoise. By breakfast, we reckoned we deserved the handmade tortillas, fresh tamarind juice and pancakes on offer, and felt slightly guilty at how quickly we got used to having sumptuous mattresses dressed with towels and umbrellas made up for us on the beach.

With only ourselves to please, there was none of the usual juggling of different family priorities. We slipped into an easy, affectionate intimacy, with plenty of jokes and hugs. I hope our renewed bond will reap dividends in the fractious teenage years to come. I felt overwhelmed with pride and enjoyment of my beautiful, grown-up daughter, and grateful to have such special one-on-one time. We became perfectly in tune, occasionally breaking up our lounging with a snorkelling trip on a speedboat. Out on the reef we

time, occasionally breaking up our lounging with a snorkeling trip on a speedboat. Out on the reef, we discovered waving purple coral, tropical fish and a ray as thick as my thigh.

Another highlight was the resort's Mexican cooking session, where we ate ceviche and corn chips while the chef talked us through his recipes on a lawn above the beach. Tequila-tasting was also involved. My daughter was rather shocked when I downed a shot in one, murmuring darkly about my youthful intake. Busted, I'm afraid.

Slideshow: lazy luxury in Mexico



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The beach at the Belmond Maroma



AFTER a couple of days at the Belmond, we moved further down the Mayan Riviera, beyond Playa del Carmen, to spend the rest of our week at the Hotel Esencia. This used to be the private estate of an Italian duchess, and still aims to make guests feel as if they're being hosted by royalty. There are only 29 rooms, with no numbers on the doors, and we never had to sign for anything. It felt like staying in a private house. With its cool white rooms, old palm gardens and a beach that regularly stars as paradise in TV adverts, it

was tropical-hotel nirvana.

The Esencia has recently been bought by an American media magnate called Kevin Wendle, who has been conducting a few tweaks. The week we were there, he had a French pastrychef over from Paris, teaching the staff how to make perfect brioche, which was delivered, warm, to our terrace, with hot coffee, at 7am every morning.

Alice and I quickly established a routine: yoga at 8am, then a quick sea dip and breakfast. Then snorkelling, reading, lunch, more swimming, reading, then either a spa treatment or a movie after the 5pm sunset, and dinner at 7pm. At most meals, we played Bananagrams, which passed the time pleasantly until our food arrived. Like most kids, my daughter is an impatient diner, and in a hotel you are sitting in the restaurant, waiting, three times a day, so such an entertainment is a must.

The holiday was a great success. We loved doing yoga together — Alice was far more flexible than me, of course. The spa was also a good place for bonding, a huge thatched rondavel with a steam room at its centre and two Jacuzzis, one hot, one cold, looking out onto the jungle. Alice had her first-ever massage, a chocolate treatment; she reckoned she'd rather have eaten it. With the help of a hot eucalyptus treatment, I cleared deep knots from my shoulders that my masseuse reckoned had been there for decades. We laughed and chatted and steamed and dipped; the spa is so beautiful, it appears in a book on the spas of Mexico — a Pevsner for the massage classes.



Mum and daughter yoga at Hotel Esencia

One day, we awoke to rain and decided to go exploring. A taxi took us to the Mayan ruins at Coba, about two hours away, where we cycled through the jungle and climbed a 138ft pyramid. One of the

great moments of my life was spent high above the rainforest at Tikal, in Guatemala, the oldest and greatest Mayan city. Coba had a similar feel. I felt honoured to introduce my daughter to the joys of Indiana Jones-style exploring, and we added to the travelling vibe by nosing round a local village on our return journey, and learning some Mayan (tree, jungle, bird). To add to the adventure, Alice zoomed down a zip wire so long that we couldn't see the end of it across a mighty lake.

Less successful, however, was the morning when I took her to Tulum. Twenty years ago, it was a deserted hippie beach, where I slept in a hammock in a cabana on the sand for \$5. Now it's a hang-out for sun-seeking New York hipsters, lined with trendy coffee bars, hotels and restaurants so achingly chic, they have to be booked months in advance.

They say you should never go back. I should have left Tulum to my mind's eye. Instead, we taxied along and found my old guesthouse. It was still there, run by the same man. I'm not sure he remembered me, but he did remember my stepfather — I'd loved it so much, I'd subsequently sent my whole family. My stepfather is now dead. Breaking that news and talking about him made me sad — and Alice got annoyed that I had vanished from her, back into a two-decade-old reverie, surrounded by ghosts. We had our only argument of the holiday. She won, rightly; I had strayed from her into the past.

I looked around at the diminished beach and the grotty cabanas and grinned. "We're staying at the Esencia," I said, "the most heavenly hotel on Earth... what are we doing here?" I picked up Alice's bag, then we jumped back in the cab and sped back to paradise. There were no more cross words for the rest of the trip.

NEED TO KNOW

Eleanor and her daughter Alice were guests of Scott Dunn, the Hotel Esencia and the Belmond Maroma Resort & Spa. Scott Dunn has five nights at the Hotel Esencia and two nights at the Belmond Maroma from £2,990pp, B&B, including private transfers and British Airways flights from Gatwick to Cancun (020 8682 5030, scottdunn.com).

Bonding hols: the rules

Do

- Go somewhere with activities you both enjoy
- Load up your Kindle
- Take Scrabble or cards or something to play at meals
- Sleep loads, chat, bond and just hang out — this is special time

Don't

- Try to revisit your past
- Expect to do anything adult: drinking was met with raised eyebrows; don't even think about a holiday fag
- Let your hair down — on this trip, you are a responsible parent
- Compare yourself to your more lissom and lovely teenage daughter. Accept it's all about her now

