

# All-Inclusive Resorts Make Staying Put More Appealing

Business is booming at all-inclusive resorts, where travelers can enjoy multiday stays without complicated logistics — plus in-house dining, outdoor diversions and, in many cases, on-site virus testing.

By Sarah Firshein

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After Amanda Stephens, a doctor in North Florida, had two cruises canceled last year, she turned to the next-best thing: eight days at Ambergris Cay, an all-inclusive luxury resort on a private island in Turks and Caicos, a British overseas territory. The family's November trip was filled with white-sand beaches, water sports, on-site dining, complimentary spa treatments, and games and activities for the children, 7 and 11.

"I think my Google search was literally 'private island,'" joked Dr. Stephens, 36. "I desperately needed a break, but as a doctor, I also needed it to feel safe — that's why we chose an all-inclusive."

A year and a half into the pandemic, with the highly contagious Delta variant continuing to ratchet up infections, travel is still complicated. International restrictions change by the week, cruising for many remains fraught and the "live like a local" ethos — which dominated travel marketing for the last decade — doesn't appeal now in quite the same way, say, on a crowded bus in a distant city. That's why many travelers like Dr. Stephens are turning to all-inclusive resorts that offer in-house dining, outdoor diversions and, in many cases, on-site testing for the coronavirus.

## A booming business

Ambergris Cay is but one of around 1,500 all-inclusive properties worldwide, according to July numbers from STR, a hospitality data and analytics company, with the term meaning that the room rate is bundled with amenities that might otherwise cost extra — say, meals, activities and service fees. Pricing can vary widely and, depending on the property, might include spa treatments, access to a kids' club and destination-specific experiences like paddle boarding or skiing. But whatever the particulars, resorts of this ilk generally provide neatly bow-tied, self-contained trips — usually without complicated logistics.

"The people who liked piecing trips together and exploring the unknown are approaching travel a little less adventurously," said Melissa Wu, the owner of Woodlyn Travel, a travel agency in Pasadena, Calif. "Covid numbers are unpredictable; countries keep changing their entry requirements. And people are just tired: They're worried about their health, their kids, their work; they're burned out from the juggling."

It's no surprise, then, that all-inclusives are booming. September and October bookings at Sandals Resorts, which has 15 all-inclusives in the Caribbean, are up 151 percent compared to 2019. Club Med, a pioneering all-inclusive brand that has 70 resorts worldwide and is planning to debut in Canada, in the Le Massif ski area of Quebec, in December, has reported record sales this year, with several weeks this summer showing double-digit growth in bookings over 2019.

Even the uninitiated are tuning in: In the last six months, more than 80 percent of total bookings at Club Med Sandpiper Bay, in Port St. Lucie, Fla., have been made by first-time guests, who have also accounted for more than 70 percent of bookings at Club Med's Mexico and Caribbean resorts.

"We know that many of these guests decided to book an all-inclusive vacation with us in order to avoid the hassle of coordinating a do-it-yourself vacation, especially after such a challenging year," said Carolyn Doyon, the president and chief executive of Club Med North America and the Caribbean.

Mary Johnson, 42, has taken her children, 8 and 10, to European capitals, Caribbean beaches and on cruises in equal measure. In August, she and her family headed to Sandpiper Bay because it checked her three major criteria: all-inclusive, in the United States and chock-full of kid-friendly activities, like talent shows, trapeze lessons and outdoor movies.

“The benefit of this type of vacation with Covid is that you don’t have to risk exposing yourself outside the resort,” said Ms. Johnson, a stay-at-home parent who lives in Parkland, Fla. “You feel safer because you see the procedures — you see how everything is being handled.”

Other hotel companies are also leaning into the sector. Hilton has recently opened all-inclusives in Curaçao and Mexico, with Cancun and Tulum coming soon. Marriott International has added more than 20 all-inclusive resorts since February and will expand to more than 30 by 2025. Hyatt’s planned acquisition of Apple Leisure Group — which includes Secrets Resorts & Spas and several other all-inclusive hotel companies — will give it one of the largest all-inclusive portfolios in the world.

The all-inclusive Ambergris Cay resort, on a private island in Turks and Caicos, offers white-sand beaches and water sports among its amenities to guests. Ambergris Cay

## Alternatives to cruises

Dr. Stephens and her family had taken at least six cruises before the pandemic and found that the all-inclusive nature of Ambergris Cay felt similar to cruising. But the biggest differentiator — the lack of crowds — is what really cemented their return trip this fall.

“I think we’ll always enjoy cruising,” Dr. Stephens said. “But this did not in any way feel like a consolation prize. This experience not only measured up to, but it exceeded, any cruising experience we had.”

Citing vaccination requirements and pre-cruise testing, Bianca Rios, the owner of Ahoy Vacations, a family-travel agency based in Ranson, W.Va., said that all-inclusive resorts are an antidote, of sorts, to some of the virus “hoops” cruise-lovers now face.

“While some people still love cruising and find the changes worth it, others don’t want their memories to revolve around Covid rules,” she said. “While cruising is still adjusting to the new normal, all-inclusive resorts offer a similar experience on land and are a natural shift.”

## On-site testing and other amenities

Resorts are also finding new ways to make it sexy to stay put. At Twin Farms, an adults-only, all-inclusive resort in Vermont, an old mountaintop lift shack has been converted into a setting for private meals, and archery has been added to the activities lineup. In California, Alila Ventana Big Sur, which shifted to the all-inclusive model last year as a direct response to the pandemic, has a new “outpost” with an arsenal of complimentary equipment and amenities for guests to borrow, from Yeti coolers to beach blankets, as well as new outdoor lounging nooks.

And in addition to 12 new bungalows — friendly to social distancing — and a new beach restaurant, Sirenian Bay Resort & Villas, in Placencia, Belize, also shifted gears and reopened as an all-inclusive last fall, when the country lifted restrictions on international tourism.

“Covid has undoubtedly changed the way people are vacationing,” said Brian Montgomery, Sirenian Bay’s owner. “By moving to all-inclusive, we were able to help limit exposure for both international travelers and local residents.”

Sirenian Bay also has another distinctly 2021 resort amenity: on-site coronavirus testing. Because anyone traveling to the United States must present a negative virus test, countless resorts worldwide, including Ambergris Cay, all Sandals resorts and all Club Med resorts in Mexico and the Caribbean, have started offering the service.

“If a resort wants to have international travelers of any sort, that’s a must,” Ms. Wu said. “It saves the guests from yet another Google search — more trips to the concierge, more hassle.”

But testing isn't the only pandemic hurdle masquerading as a perk. A new Vacation Assurance program from Sandals guarantees, among other protections, a free replacement vacation and airfare (up to \$500 per person) for guests whose trips are disrupted by the virus.

Riccardo Ravasini, and his wife, Moon Kim, with their son, Julian, and daughter, Mila. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

## All-inclusive packages

Even at resorts that aren't fully all-inclusive, many travelers are finding newfound appeal in all-inclusive experiences and packages. And operators are noticing: In response to increased demand from pandemic-era guests for on-site health and wellness options, Soneva Jani, a luxury resort in the Maldives, launched a new, \$500-a-day all-inclusive spa offer featuring unlimited treatments, fitness activities and more.

Before the pandemic, Moon Kim, 39, and Riccardo Ravasini, 40, honeymooned in Argentina and Brazil, and thought nothing of long-haul flights to Asia. They were accustomed to active trips and robust itineraries.

In July, the couple, who lives in New York City, took their two children, 2 and 4, to two resorts in Italy: Park Hotel Casimiro in Lake Garda and Hotel Aurora, near Venice, and purchased all-inclusive packages, which included all of their meals, at both. With much of their vacation a no-brainer, they quickly settled into relaxation mode, beginning their days with yoga sessions or swims and concluding them with family dinner.

"We had the best of both worlds: a level of comfort and familiarity, and something that felt totally different, where we were really able to recharge," said Ms. Kim, who works in corporate public relations.

Suzanne Sena met a friend at the Broadmoor, a 5,000-acre resort in Colorado Springs, for an all-inclusive women-only retreat. Beth Collier for The New York Times

In July, Suzanne Sena, a former news anchor-turned-entrepreneur, met a friend at the Broadmoor, a 5,000-acre resort in Colorado Springs, for an all-inclusive women-only retreat at the property's Fly Fishing Camp. There were plush towels at every turn, a clambake overflowing with lobster tails, a fire pit for after-dinner cocktails and more.

"I didn't have to make any decisions except, 'Would I rather stay on the river or attend the wine tasting?'" said Ms. Sena, 58. "It felt like total luxury to not have to plan a thing."

Sarah Firshein is also our Tripped Up columnist. If you need advice about a best-laid travel plan that went awry, send an email to [travel@nytimes.com](mailto:travel@nytimes.com).

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