

JAMAICA

Whale and weather watching in Jamaica

Nature trumps TV at Beaches Boscobel



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Endless hours of watery fun await children and adults at Beaches Boscobel Resort in Jamaica. (Courtesy BEACHES RESORTS)

Every morning starts the same: First, the breeze off the Caribbean Sea flutters the filmy curtains covering our windows. The sails on the masts of the boats below our balcony begin to crinkle and shift. The black bird with the piercing yellow eyes lands on a deck chair and chirps us awake. "How 'bout a cookie m'lady?" I imagine he's asking. "Just a crumb? How 'bout you wake up and offer me one?"

It's just another Tuesday morning at Beaches Boscobel Resort in Jamaica. Or is it Wednesday? Thursday? I've lost count.

I've arrived here with my nine-year-old son in eager tow, just the two of us venturing away from work and school to rest and reconnect. Beaches' 2012 Single Parent Fun (SPF) package is on now (May 1-24 and Sept. 4-Oct. 31), during which the single supplement fee of up to \$220 US per night is waived at Beaches' four family resorts: Jamaica's Negril, Sandy Bay and Boscobel, plus Beaches Turks & Caicos.

We're booked in at Beaches Boscobel (beaches.com) near Ocho Rios, a two-hour shuttle ride from the airport along Jamaica's hilly northern coast. We've flown Toronto to Montego Bay, sipped free welcome drinks in the Beaches/Sandals lounge at "Mo" Bay airport, then hopped the two-hour shuttle to our quiet refuge by a small beach.

These are the first mornings in recent memory my son has not reached for the TV remote. I have not discouraged TV in Jamaica, but it doesn't appear to cross his mind. Instead, it has become his habit to wander onto the balcony where I'm sipping my coffee and use his mini binoculars to, in his words, "watch for whales and predict the weather."

"There are clouds out there this morning, Mom," he reports. "Plus lots of birds, but so far no whales. Are there any whales off the coast of Jamaica?" (Yes.)

It has become our morning routine to climb the few steps separating our room from the pool to take our first swim. Beaches Boscobel is built into a hillside and as a result, everything -- the rooms, the pools, the restaurants -- is terraced. There are loads of ramps and steps, but as a result, the tiered views of the Caribbean are astonishing. We slip into the main pool -- one of four at Boscobel -- and take turns diving for toys. After a while, we climb a few more steps to the poolside buffet and load up with pancakes and fresh papaya. It's here that we usually plan our day.

Despite the sameness of our early morning routines, we manage to mix it up through the midday hours. The beauty of Beaches Boscobel is its proximity to Ocho Rios -- Jamaica's adventure hot spot.

Dunn's River Falls is nearby -- a 183-metre climb up a natural waterfall. Next door to Dunn's is Mystic Mountain, which turns out to be the adventure highlight of our trip. We ride a four-person chairlift to the summit of a Jamaican mountain with jungle (instead of ski runs) below us, then glide down 1,500 metres at 45 kph on a Jamaican bobsled. The experience is exhilarating -- really, a ton of fun.

Highlight No. 2 is golf. Boscobel is the only resort in the Beaches chain offering free golf nearby -- unlimited green fees, clinics and junior club rentals are included in each stay. Following a bumpy, winding, 10-minute shuttle to the course, my son, a lefty, gets some tips on the practice range courtesy of the assistant pro. I tour the links -- a hilly-yet-open, par 71 perched in the midst of Jamaica's Ste. Anne Mountains with a panoramic view of the blue Caribbean. Fairways are lined with tropical trees -- avocado, coconut and ackee, Jamaica's national fruit. Caddies -- mandatory yet handy -- are an extra fee.

Highlight No. 3 is our visit to a local primary school sponsored by The Sandals Foundation. The Foundation was created by Beaches and Sandals Resorts' owner Butch Stewart, a Jamaican who started his vacation empire from scratch and is now trying to give back. Guests at both Beaches and Sandals are invited to join daily storytimes. It's an eye-opener for my son, one I doubt he'll forget. He is quiet as we walk back to the plush grounds of the resort. He asks, "Why is our place so much nicer?"

I give him straight answers that he considers the remainder of the trip. On our next visit, we pledge to bring needed school supplies -- simple items like erasers, paper, pencils and books.

Beaches partners with Sesame Street to entertain kids with live appearances from Grover, Elmo, Cookie and Abby Cadabby. I'm certain my son is too old for Sesame Street, but when they're performing nightly on stage he throws himself into it, busting moves with Ernie and Bert. Throughout our stay he high-fives them at breakfast, at the weekly parades and at kid-friendly activities around the resort. I guess you're never too old to jam with Ernie and Bert.

My son and his new pals join a tween-friendly scratch DJ session in Boscobel's nightclub one afternoon. Later they're invited to make bracelets, tie-dye T-shirts, play X-Box 360 and learn to cook.

But their favourite pastime -- the one no kid at Boscobel can get enough of -- takes place at the waterpark. Boscobel has at least five spectacular waterslides -- from novice to expert. Hence, like our mornings, our days end the same way every day. Our final routine? Jetting down the slides over and over -- forwards, backwards, lying down, sitting up, on a tube. This routine proves exhausting, but it works. We're both asleep by 9:30 each night, binoculars at the ready for tomorrow morning's whale and weather watch.

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