

# Check in and check it out

New beach resorts combine uncrowded settings with endless amenities, luxe lodgings, gourmet dining and under-the-radar excursions, **Adam Bisby** writes

Never mind the jetboards, when will I find anything at all? Since strolling past the westernmost beach chair of the brand new Club Med Miches Playa Esmeralda, my search for these intriguing electric amenities has turned up little but white sand, swaying palms and surreal driftwood.

A faint buzzing sound mingles with the hiss of the surf as I approach a bend in the deserted beach. Then I hear several squeals of delight and, seconds later, spot the jetboard dock bobbing on the glassy surface of Samana Bay.

Playa Esmeralda's isolated setting is even more unusual and enjoyable than the jetboards turn out to be. Unlike most all-inclusive beach resorts, which tend to be booked up by rivals of varying descriptions, the first new Club Med to open in the Caribbean in a quarter century lets guests escape the madding crowds while still accessing endless luxurious amenities, upscale accommodations, gourmet dining galore and under-the-radar excursions that visitors to busier destinations might easily overlook.

Playa Esmeralda isn't alone in offering this idyllic mix of seclusion and high living. Across the Caribbean and Mexico, tourism-fuelled infrastructure expansion is paving the way for travellers to have it all, while getting away from it all, at these six new and soon-to-open resorts.

## CLUB MED MICHES PLAYA ESMERALDA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Getting there tends to be considerably less than half the fun when it comes to all-inclusive resorts and Club Med's newest property is no exception. This is not to say that the journey is unpleasant. While the 80-minute transfer from Punta Cana International Airport does take about an hour longer than rides to many of the resorts lining the Dominican Republic's eastern coast, it is both smooth and direct thanks to recent highway improvements.

Rolling into the 37.6-hectare property silences any impatient murmurs. Club Med spent

US\$100-million on the place, after all, with the stylishly thatched entrance hall and reception area setting the eco-chic tone.

The resort is divided into four fetchingly landscaped boutique villages: the adults-only Archipelago, where 18 oceanfront suites include private pools and outdoor showers; the 111-room Caribbean Paradise, set between the Coco Plum Beach Lounge – one of four restaurants – and the main swimming pool; Explorer Cove, a 158-room family-oriented area near the waterslide-equipped children's club; and Emerald Jungle, the 48-room adults-only enclave where I bed down in airy and spacious digs after a sublime soak in the nearby Zen Pool and a massage at the serene Cinq Mondes spa.

Once on site, much fun is to be had. In addition to the electric jetboards – birthday wish-list sorted, by the way – the property offers more than 25 different sports and activities ranging from tennis and pickleball on a dozen floodlit courts to yoga in a scenic Treetop Wellness Canopy. There's even some culinary fun to be had beyond the four lounges and three wine cellars, courtesy of a secret chocolate room staffed by a grinning Dominicano version of Willy Wonka. Outside the resort, excursions include all-terrain bus trips up the 304-metre Montana Redonda, where wooden swing sets ring the summit in Instagram-friendly fashion.

## IBEROSTAR SELECTION ESMERALDA, CUBA

An hour's drive from Cayo Coco's international airport via a new road and causeway, 25-kilometre-long Cayo Cruz is the outermost island in the beach-blessed Jardines del Rey archipelago. Currently home to just two all-inclusive resorts – the 546-room adults-only Valentin Cayo Cruz and the boutique La Marina Plaza and Spa, both of which opened their doors in 2019 – the island will add a third if and when the all-inclusive Iberostar Selection Esmeralda opens as scheduled by the end of the month.

Designed to evoke 19th-centu-

ry Cuba, the Iberostar will be divided into 450-room and 120-room sections, with the latter, dubbed the "Coral Level," offering butler service and a cigar lounge among its next-level indulgences. As the northernmost resort on Cayo Cruz, the Iberostar will offer one big advantage to serenity-seekers: Turn left at the white sands and there's five undeveloped kilometres of beachfront in front of them.

## EXCELLENCE OYSTER BAY, JAMAICA

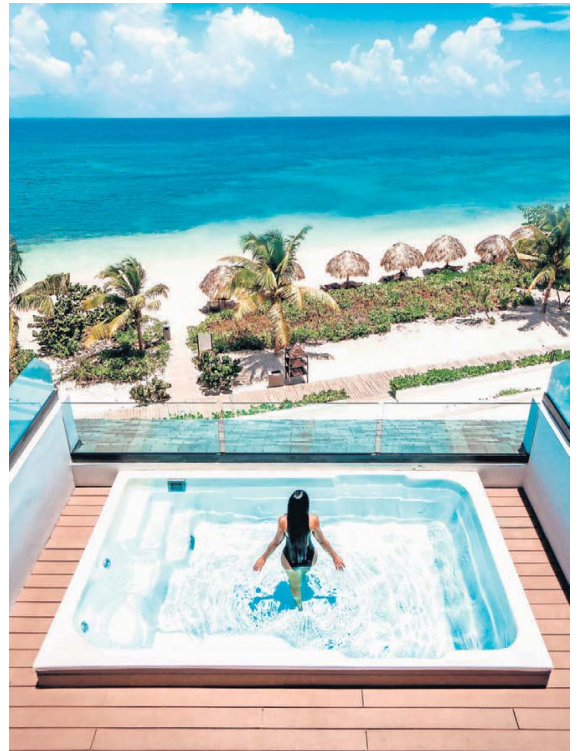
Think sandy seclusion always has to mean longer-than-usual airport transfers? Think again. This Victorian-style adults-only property opened in 2018 on a private peninsula 30 minutes by car from Montego Bay's Sangster International Airport.

The 315 suites range from stylish juniors to an imperial suite with a plunge pool and rooftop terrace overlooking the three kilometres of pristine beach lining the peninsula's north shore. Dining options are similarly diverse, with everything from classic French cuisine to casual sports-bar fare served across eight eateries.

## VILLAS AT SILVER COVE, THE BAHAMAS

Moving from private peninsulas to private islands, Norwegian Cruise Line recently unveiled a 38-villa resort on Great Stirrup Cay. Part of the Norwegian Edge program, a US\$400-million upgrade of ships and onshore amenities, the Silver Cove villas range from studios to two-bedroom units, two of which come with extra-large ensuite master bedrooms and private dining and entertainment spaces.

As well as including access to a private beach and the Silver Cove Restaurant and Bar, all villas are within easy walking distance of the 110-hectare island's extensive beachfront, zip-lines, nature trails and plentiful dining and lounging options. The Fate of the Fancy snorkel trail, meanwhile, explores nautical artifacts such as cannons and treasure chests care-



The Excellence Oyster Bay in Jamaica has suites with plunge pools and rooftop terraces. COURTESY OF EXCELLENCE RESORTS

fully arranged amid the coral reefs in Bertram's Cove. There's even a sunken piano, which may or may not have been placed aboard the Fancy, a derelict schooner that is the trail's centerpiece.

## CONRAD PUNTA DE MITA, MEXICO

One of the advantages of having an oceanside golf course as a neighbour is that the beach next to the fairways is difficult to develop. Such is the case with Hilton Hotels & Resorts' new Conrad Punta de Mita, which is slated to open in May in Riviera Nayarit.

A two-minute golf cart ride from the Greg Norman-designed Litibu Golf Course, the Conrad's 324 suites will offer large patios, plunge pools, freestanding soaking tubs and outdoor showers. Amenities will include three pools – one each for adults, serious swimmers and families – a games room and children's club. The four restaurants and three bars will include a mezcal and tequila barrel-tasting room, with the 10,000-square-foot Conrad Spa featuring seven treatment cabanas connected by flower-lined pathways.

Turn west, and those paths will lead to a beach that runs uninterrupted along the Pacific Ocean for

more than a kilometre.

## ONE&ONLY MANDARINA, MEXICO

A 40-minute drive north of the Conrad, this 104-unit luxury resort is slated to open about a month later on June 1. Set on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the resort's free-standing "treehouse hotel rooms" will be perched more than nine metres above the ground in the forest canopy. As with the one- and two-bedroom villas, all lodgings will feature private pools, roomy terraces and butler service.

The six-treatment-room One&Only Spa will also be integrated into its arboreal surroundings, with an outdoor gym and yoga palapa carved into the landscape.

Down on the previously undeveloped Playa Canalan, the resort's Jetty Beach Club will serve casual fare and cocktails to guests lounging on day beds and soaking in infinity pools. Two more eateries, Alma and Carau, will offer Mediterranean and Mexican fare, respectively, in scenic settings overlooking the sands.

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The writer was a guest of Club Med. It did not review or approve this article.

# Here comes the fun

March Break is around the corner, but there's no need to worry if you don't have plans, **Barry Choi** writes. From sunning in Florida to skiing in Vermont, these are some of the best travel deals available now

## SUNNY HOTEL DEALS

When you use promo code SPJ on Feb. 29, 2020, only, you can save 29 per cent on stays of three nights or more at the Marriott Cancun Resort or JW Marriott Cancun Resort & Spa with travel dates between March 1 and Dec. 24, 2020. Over in the Bahamas, you can save 48 per cent at Breezes when you book by Feb. 29 and travel by Dec. 25, 2020. This is a more-than-14-year-old, all-inclusive property that has three pools and activities such as flying trapeze and sumo wrestling. Club Med has seven-night air-inclusive escapes from \$1,599 to Mexico, the Caribbean, or Florida when you book by Feb. 25, 2020, and complete your stay by Aug. 22, 2020. As part of this deal, kids under 4 stay free, kids under 16 are up to 50 per cent off, and you get your first checked bag free.

## SPEND MARCH BREAK IN TORONTO

Located in downtown Toronto, the Chelsea Hotel has two deals available right now. There's the weekend wanderer sale that's valid until March 31, 2020, stays start from \$124 for one night or from \$109 a night for two nights. Alternatively, the Chelsea's March Break offer (March 13-22) has rates from \$129 a night, including free parking and an optional second room for just \$99. During March Break, the hotel will have complementary activities onsite, which include movies, magic shows, video-game

tournaments and more. If you're looking for more ways to save, there's the Toronto CityPASS which gives you 36 per cent off admission at five top attractions.

## SEE JAPAN BEFORE THE OLYMPIC RUSH

Guests who book Oku Japan's four- or five-day self-guided Nakasendo tour by March 15 and travel by July 24, 2020, will get a free extra night at a secluded onsen ryokan when using promo code Oku2020. If you prefer a guided excursion, G Adventures has up to 20 per cent off Japan tours when you book by Feb. 29 and travel by June 7, 2020. The nine-day Japan Express itinerary is a popular choice as it'll take you to from Osaka to Tokyo with stops in Koyasan, Hiroshima and Mount Fuji along the way.

## SAVINGS IN FLORIDA

Valid until March 30, 2020, the Plunge Beach Resort hotel in Lauderdale-By-The-Sea, Fla., has a No Pinch Lobster package with rates as low as US\$101 a night. This deal includes 15 per cent off the room rate, 20 per cent off food and drinks and a two-tank dive package with boat charter MissConduct. If you're headed to Fort Lauderdale, the Atlantic Hotel + Spa gives you two ways to get 15 per cent off your stay. You can either book at least 14 days in advance or pay with your American Express card. Down in Miami, Solé Miami, a Noble House Resort, is giving guests the fourth

night free when you pay for three nights. There's also the National Hotel, where you'll get a US\$80 food and beverage credit as part of their 80th-anniversary celebration.

## KIDS SKI FREE IN VERMONT

Multiple mountains have ski promotions during March Break. Up to two children (12 years old and younger) receive free lift tickets for every day of their trip at Stratton Mountain Resort. This deal applies only to midweek stays between March 8 and April 10, 2020. When you book two nights between March 1 and March 31, 2020, at the Burke Mountain Hotel, up to two children ski free when using promo code KSFREE. If you're looking just for accommodations, the Red Clover Inn has a midweek snow escape deal where you get the third night free when booking two nights.

## BIG SALE ON HOTELS AROUND THE GLOBE

People travelling before April 30, 2020, can save 15 per cent to 30 per cent at more than 1,000 IHG Hotels & Resorts in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Brazil as long as you book by Feb. 29, 2020. Accor Hotels, which owns brands Fairmont, Swissotel, Sofitel, Novotel and more, is offering up to 25 per cent off stays in North and Central America. The longer you stay, the more you save, but you must book by March 30, 2020, for stays until April 30, 2020.



Want to catch a spring training game? Guests of the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach get tickets to see the Phillies play. NICHOLAS A. COLLURA-GEHRT

## HEAD TO SPRING TRAINING AND SAVE

Guests who book the Ultimate Philadelphia Phillies Spring Training Experience at the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach get up to four tickets to a Phillies spring training home game at Spectrum Field (they play the Toronto Blue Jays on March 5), local beers and a baseball-themed welcome amenity upon arrival on stays between February and March 23, 2020. If you prefer the Cactus League in Arizona, the Phoenixian has a family excursions deal where you can get a second room for children up to the age of 21 at 25 per cent off. Children 12 and under also eat free with the purchase of an adult meal, valid through Dec. 31, 2020.

## FREE UPGRADES AND ONBOARD CREDITS WHEN CRUISING

Those looking to take a European or Christmas Market river cruise can take advantage of AmaWaterways' Triple Savings offer. When you book by March

31, 2020, you'll get up to \$2,400 off for a stateroom, a free stateroom upgrade and a \$100 onboard credit for each stateroom. This offer is also available for Mekong cruises, but you get free gratuities instead of the room upgrade.

## UP TO 20 PER CENT OFF ON WORLDWIDE TRIPS FOR YOUNG CANADIANS

Contiki, which runs guided experiences for 18 to 35 year olds, has a global sale right now where you can save up to 20 per cent on select 2020 and 2021 excursions booked by Feb. 27, 2020. Iconic Essentials, Discoverer & In-depth Explorer Europe 2020 departures are 20 per cent off. Trips less than seven days in Europe, Sailing, Ski & Snowboard, Australia & New Zealand journeys are available at 15 per cent off. And you'll get 10 per cent off United States, Canada and Latin America trips. Some of their top trips include island hopping in Greece, Peru Uncovered and Auckland to Queenstown.

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