



GOING OUR WAY

The elusive all-inclusive resort

BY CAROL SOTILI

I thought coming up with a Caribbean destination that would satisfy Karen MacDowell's wish list — all-inclusive, no kids, easy flight from Washington, ocean view, fairly new, spa services, relatively modest budget, preferably leaving on Thursday and returning on Tuesday — would be relatively simple. Wrong.

Just getting there without connecting is the first problem: As financially strapped airlines have reduced service, nonstop flights to the islands have become less frequent. And although there are lots of resorts that purport to offer all that and a bag of chips, take a closer look and many appear to be more like paradise lost. Bad service, lousy food, bugs, safety issues, etc., are common complaints among travelers who share their reviews on sites such as TripAdvisor and Wheretostay.com.

My own experiences with all-inclusive Caribbean resorts have left something to be desired. Either you're paying big bucks — \$500-plus a night per couple — or you're putting up with mystery meat, headache-inducing booze, scores of screaming kids and/or seaweed-choked beaches. I did manage decent, but not return-worthy, experiences at a now-closed resort in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, and at an Iberostar near Cancun — I know, not a Caribbean island, but I'm going to include it in this article, as it offers many adult-only all-inclusives and is considered a tropical destination.

All, however, is not hopeless. Make a few concessions and at least a few places will fit most of the bill. (All prices are for late April travel.)

If the trip is only five nights, a nonstop flight is a real boon. (Tip: A direct flight may stop en route to its final destination, with no change of plane required. It is

not the same as a nonstop flight.) There are nonstop flights from the Washington area to several Caribbean destinations, including the Bahamas, Aruba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. From Dulles, Cancun is the best bet, with frequent nonstop flights on several airlines, including United and Mexicana. From Reagan, US Airways offers daily nonstops to Nassau, Bahamas. Drive up to Baltimore-Washington International to catch nonstop flights on AirTran and Air Jamaica to Montego Bay, Jamaica. To San Juan, there are frequent nonstops from both Dulles and BWI on several airlines. United flies nonstop to Aruba, but only on weekends.

Assuming we've narrowed the search to nonstop destinations, let's examine resorts that may work.

- If you can extend the trip to seven nights or change your days to travel nonstop one way and connect the other, **Aruba** offers a dry, albeit often windy climate, a low crime rate and friendly people. The island is small and easy to navigate. It doesn't have many all-inclusives, and adult-only properties are extremely limited. My recommendation is **Bucuti Beach Resort** (www.bucuti.com), where kids are accepted but discouraged. Though it's not all-inclusive, it offers a meal plan that allows dining at any of 18 Aruba Gastronomic Association restaurants. The 63-room resort is situated on a 14-acre parcel right on Eagle Beach.

Total cost: You will go over budget by a few hundred dollars. Rates are \$363 a night per couple with meal plan. Airfare is \$400 per person round-trip for connecting flights, \$530 for one way nonstop with connecting return, \$640 for nonstops both ways.

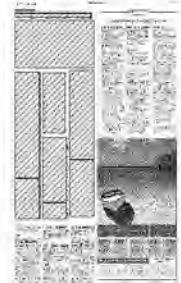
- **Nassau, Bahamas** on Paradise Island is easy to get to and has several all-inclusive resorts. Most

are expensive: Sandals Royal Bahamian, for example, is \$3,014 per couple for five nights, including nonstop airfare from Reagan National. The cheapest room at Atlantis, including meal plan, will run more than \$3,100 with air. Two all-inclusives within your budget are Breezes Baha-

mas (877-273-3937, www.breezes.com; rates start at about \$2,300 per couple for a five-night package including air), which is an adults-only resort, and Riu Palace Paradise Island (866-845-3765, www.riu.com; about \$2,600 per couple with air), which welcomes children; both properties are busy, so the getting-up-early-to-score-a-lounge-chair scenario may be part of the deal. My recommendation is to cut the trip to four nights or break the budget and stay at the adults-only boutique hotel Rock House (www.rockhousebahamas.com), where rates, including breakfast, start at \$380 a night: Add airfare, and total, before lunch/dinner/drinks, is about \$2,100 for four nights.

- **Cancun** and resort areas south of there, including **Playa del Carmen** and **Tulum**, are lined with beachfront all-inclusives. The best ones, such as Royal Hideaway Playacar and Le Blanc Spa Resort, are serious money — more than \$3,500 per couple for five nights, including nonstop airfare from Dulles. But many above-average adults-only all-inclusives are within your range. My pick is Secrets Maroma Bay (866-467-3273, www.secretsresorts.com), with rates for five nights starting at \$2,648 per couple, including nonstop flights.

- **Jamaica** is known for its vast array of all-inclusive resorts at all price levels, but beware of cheap deals. Several years ago, I stayed at one in Montego Bay (now out of business) that cost less than \$1,400 per couple, including airfare, for four nights: It was a dis-





aster. The top-shelf all-inclusives, which include Iberostar Grand Rose Hotel, the Caves and Jamaica Inn, will all run more than \$3,000 for five nights before airfare. Bring it down a few notches, and stay at Couples Tower Isle (800-268-7537, www.couples.com) in Ocho Rios: A five-night package, including nonstop airfare from BWI, is about \$2,700 per couple.



FAMILY PHOTO

● While **Puerto Rico** is easy to get to, it's probably your least likely destination, as it offers few all-inclusive or adults-only options. Copamarina Beach Resort and Spa (800-468-4553, www.copamarina.com) in Guanica has an all-inclusive package starting at \$2,300 per couple (airfare is an extra \$528 per couple). Hix Island House (www.hixislandhouse.com) is an adults-only property in Vieques, with room-only rates starting at \$185 per night.

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Who: Karen MacDowell, 49, and her husband, David Hanlon Jr., 50, of South Riding
Where: An upscale all-inclusive adults-only resort in the Caribbean
Why: To celebrate her 50th birthday
When: March/April 2010
Budget: \$2,500

"We just want a nice, newish location where we don't have to get up each morning at 6:30 to take out a lounge chair at the beach or the pool. We enjoy snorkeling and ocean kayaking. A direct flight is always a plus."



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Cancun isn't an island, but it's lined with beachfront resorts.