

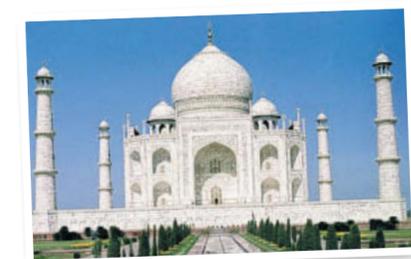
news BEING restricted to eating in a certain restaurant at a set time of the day, every day, has long been a big bugbear on cruises. But MSC Cruises' new Flexi-Dining option will put an end to any moaning on that front. Now you can pre-select a time slot for your evening meal but can change it at any time. Diners will be able to enjoy the new service on MSC Meraviglia, the firm's new mega-liner launching in June. It will also feature more speciality restaurants where you can upgrade your meal for the likes of teppanyaki for a small fee. The service will also be available on their new MSC Seaside when it launches in December. See msccruises.co.uk for more details.



LIVING THE THAI LIFE

THERE'S a decent 40 per cent off two weeks' B&B at the Evasion Hua Hin, Thailand. The £855 price tag includes Emirates flights from Gatwick on selected dates from April 20 to July 13. Close to the floating markets of beach town Hua Hin and overlooking the ocean, the hotel is in the middle of an eco-friendly resort. There's a choice of places to eat in the resort, including the Kieng Sah Restaurant serving authentic Thai food. For those keen to work off all that food, there's a fitness centre plus tennis courts, archery, bicycles and beach volley. Call 0208 972 8949 or see emiratesholidays.co.uk

news LOW-COST airline Norwegian will be able to sell hotel packages alongside its flights after linking up with Hotels.com. The partnership with the Expedia brand gives the airline's passengers access to 300,000 hotels with more than 100million trusted reviews. The deal means Norwegian can now sell discounted accommodation along with flights, allowing it to compete with BA, Ryanair and easyJet, who already sell packages. Norwegian's customers will also be able to choose to pay for their hotel reservation at the time of booking or on arrival.



HEIR WE GO TO INDIA

PRINCE William and wife Kate Middleton are set to make an official trip to India next month — 24 years after his mum Princess Diana made the same visit. The royal couple will travel through the cities of Mumbai, Delhi and Assam, with a scheduled excursion to the world famous Taj Mahal. Holidaymakers keen to follow in the footsteps of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge don't have to be heirs to the throne to travel like royalty. Insight Vacations, the expert in escorted touring, has created the perfect Indian itinerary. The seven-day Essence of India tour, takes in Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, including the Taj Mahal. See insightvacations.com

bargain FANCY a week in Greece for just over £300? Or how about a seven nights in the Canaries for under £400? Then Barrhead Travel is the place to go. Scotland's biggest independent travel agents have some fantastic deals at the moment, including a week half-board at the 3*+ Anastasia Hotel in Stalis, Crete, reduced from £55pp to £317pp including flights from Glasgow on May 12. Or head to Italy, where you can get a week half-board at the 4* Majestic Palace in Sant Agnello, near Naples, reduced from £525pp to £367pp, leaving Glasgow on April 28. See barrheadtravel.co.uk

AMAZING ALGARVE IN PORTUGAL IS IDEAL FOR A FUN-FILLED FAMILY BREAK



SPLASH HIT... one of many pools at Pine Cliffs Ocean Suites



ANCIENT AND MODERN... renovated historic castle at Silves and Pine Cliffs Ocean Suites



SMILES... Robin with daughters Tara & Emma

At the best

I'VE been lucky enough to visit a few countries, but there is one oasis I choose to bring my family back to every year — Portugal's Algarve. It is the ultimate, easy, place for a great hol with little ones. The weather is ideal, especially in spring and autumn when it's not quite as hot as the blazing days of summer. And the local people are great with kids, so families fit in no matter whether they are on the beach or in a high-end restaurant at night. My two wee girls, Tara and Emma, love Portuguese food so add in theme parks, good value for money and great places to stay and you can see why the Algarve stacks up. **We loved exploring historic old towns** Where you stay is crucial. We alternate each year between a hotel and a villa. The hotel is always the Pine Cliffs, a resort that boasts its own beach and myriad swimming pools. It's away from the busy main resort of Albufeira, so is much quieter. We were lucky enough to have stayed at the seriously plush new Ocean Suites recently but they have everything from hotel rooms to big villas. Pine Cliffs also have the ultimate family playground, Porto Pirata. It's a massive area set around full-size pirate ship. There are organised activities, but kids are also free to ramble all over the ship, bash around on the karts, check out the bouncy castle and play basketball. Another neat touch is that the resort is connected by a cute miniature train service. If you prefer a villa, we rate Vintage Travel. On our last trip we booked Casa Idalina, an eight-person villa with loads of



GO: ALGARVE

GETTING/STAYING THERE: Jet2 fly to Faro from Edinburgh on £171pp return. See jet2.com A week at Pine Cliffs is £890 for a two-bedroom, four-person suite. See pinecliffs.com A week at the eight-person Casa Idalina costs from £475 off-season. See vintagetravel.co.uk **MORE INFO:** Holiday Autos offer a week's car hire in the Algarve from £40. See also visitalgarve.pt



park. They have rides and water slides and much more. Next door to Zoomarine is Fiesa (fiesa.org) at Pena. From March through to the end of October the world's largest collection of sand sculptures — created by artists from all over the world — is on show. I love seeing the faces on kids arriving for the first time. Sculptures up to 12m high soar everywhere they look. And, of course, there is a sandpit for the wee ones to mess about in.

My girls enjoy wandering around the Algarve's towns and villages checking out the shops. Faro is also ideal. They love exploring old towns, so we usually head for historic Lagos as well as sleepy Tavira with its riverside strolls and flurry of churches. Inland I'd recommend Silves, with its fairytale castle. The most fun way of getting there is by boat up the river from Portimao. It shows another side of the Algarve away from the busy resorts. You will see far more birds than people on the silted-up river. There is a superb piri piri chicken restaurant by the ferry dock, so time your boat for lunchtime. The beaches are, of course, what brought tourists to the Algarve in the first place. If you want to escape the crowds then hire a car and head east. At Pedras Del Rei you can take the fun train over

to an island with the sands of the massive Praia do Barril. Another family favourite best reached by car is Burgau in the west. You can amble down the cobbled streets of this charming village before messing about on the picture-postcard sands. A cafe and seafood restaurant tempt afterwards. Eating out is another thrill in the Algarve. There is a multitude of choice. The cheap and cheerful tourist menus are always handy but if you're looking to tickle your tastebuds with more local dishes then make for Guia. The town is famous as the home of piri piri chicken. Our favourite is Palladium (restaurantepalladium.com), an old-timer with plenty of character, as well as delicious grilled chicken. If you're staying at Pine Cliffs there is a flurry of eating options. Their Piri Piri Restaurant is superb — a bit of

a theme gathering here. But this time it is not for its chicken but the range of superb charcoal-grilled steaks. And the staff are spot-on with the kids here. There is a great value Italian restaurant just across the road from the resort. My wife and I sneaked off for lunch one day when Tara and Emma were at the kids' club. If you're staying at a villa then the local supermarkets are great. Or head to

the Olhao Fish Market. This grand design was the work of Gustav Eiffel — more famous for his tower in Paris. Here the wee ones can help pick fresh fish and learn how they are caught and filleted. The prices are cheap too. On the money front with the euro exchange rate volatile, we find Portugal always comes in a little cheaper than Spain. Money-saving tips include opting for the prato do dia (menu of the day) in restaurants. Get car hire petrol away from Faro Airport and take your own beach towels so you save on sun lounger fees. I've taken my young family to lots of lovely places but there is one place that is set in stone for us every year. That is Portugal's southern charmer, the Algarve. Hopefully you will get the chance to enjoy the ultimate family holiday there too.



CHEERS... Robin enjoys a refreshing pint of lager

IT'S TIME TO SLOPE OFF..

WHERE better to ski with the family this April than in the friendly resort of Alpe d'Huez in France — renowned for its sunshine as much as for its excellent snow record. A week at Chalet Mariandre is from £399pp including flights from Edinburgh on April 9, transfers, wifi, free babysitting and seven nights catered accommodation. Esprit Classic Child Care is available from £215 for a week of exclusive ski lessons. More information at espritski.com or call 01483 791 920. Courchevel 1650 in France is renowned for being one of the most stylish resorts in the Alps. A week at Chalet Cascades is from £549pp including flights from Edinburgh on April 9, transfers, wifi and seven nights catered accommodation. See skitotal.com or call 01483 791 935. A week's ski holiday in France's snowy Alpine mountains is from £495pp, saving 50 per cent off the original price of £989pp, including return Manchester flights on April 1 and transfers. Accommodation is in the traditional Chalet Papillon in La Rosiere on chalet board basis. Other chalets and resorts are also available. See skibeat.co.uk or call 01273 855100. Champoluc in Italy is famous for its extensive skiing for beginners right up to professionals. A week staying at Chalet Hotel Breithorn is from £499pp including flights from Edinburgh, transfers and chalet catering. See igluski.com or call 0203 811 6381. This Easter will see the third annual 'Subl'cimes' festival in the beautiful French Alps resort of La Plagne, below. The 12-day free events takes place across six key peaks of the ski area, accessible to both skiers and non-skiers with a whole host of wild and unusual activities, providing entertainment for all the family. Ski passes for La Plagne are priced at £43 for one day or £224 for six days. Paradiski passes, including Les Arcs, are priced at £51 for one day or £258 for six days. One week's accommodation costs from £236pp (based on four sharing), including six-day Paradiski passes. For more info see la-plagne.com. A week chalet-catering at 4* Chalet Cascades in Courchevel 1650, France, from £549pp leaving Edinburgh on April 9. See skikings.co.uk or call 0800 091 0372. Luxury catered chalet company and Méribel, France, specialist Meriski has cut 10 per cent off the remaining four rooms available in the week of April 9 at Chalet Phoebe. Now from £799pp, it includes chalet catering, exclusive concierge service and in-resort driver service between 8am and 10pm. Travel not included. See meriski.co.uk or call them on 01285 648518.

WIN A GET A-WAHEY

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