

Boutique hotels catering to families with kids

Small hotels don't necessarily cost any more than the big chains

By Eileen Ogintz
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Ready to play dress up?

If you stay in the kids' suite at the Hotel Diva on San Francisco's Union Square, your little princess can do just that with sparkly shoes, a pink boa, jewelry and a drawer full of "gowns." If you have a prince, he can play Wii among other things. Whimsical wall art instructs you to "keep calm and eat a cupcake."

At the Diva, one of the local Personality Hotels, there are games, puzzles and an assortment of kids' movies. And kids sleep in bunk beds while parents sleep in a separate room attached by a hall. Older kids simply like the ambiance of the sleek hotel — glass wall, stainless steel headboards, bright blue carpet — complete with a sidewalk-of-fame featuring signatures of celebrity guests.



Kids can pitch a tent in The Houstonian Hotel in Houston.

Courtesy of The Houstonian

"Funky," declared 16-year-old Hannah Haglund, who was checking out with her family. "Different than other hotels," added her 12-year-old sister, Sarah. "A lot of character," said their mom, Marion.

Across the country, such small unique hotels are gaining a following among families who appreciate the intimate atmosphere, the service and the fact that they have, well, more personality than big chain hotels. Small hotels don't necessarily cost any more and in some cases they cost less.

"I really like the personal attention I get," said Richelle Haas of Renton, Wash. "The staff knows our name, remembers what we like and always has the car ready to go." Haas and her family, which includes two young sons, are big fans of Kimpton's 189-room Monaco near Pike Place Market in Seattle where families get a check-in packet complete with lists of kid-friendly restaurants and attractions. "It is the perfect hotel for kids," said Haas. "It never feels stuffy." Her boys, 7 and 10, especially liked that the chef gave them a tour of the kitchen and prepared a special Harry Potter dessert.

Boutique hotels, for their part, are responding to this enthusiasm with more family packages and amenities — from kids' digital cameras with some packages at New York City's Affinia Hotels to a personalized itinerary created for you at the Clifton Inn in Charlottesville, Va., where you can end the day with afternoon tea. Grab a handful of hard candies from the big jars at Whitney's Inn in Jackson, N.H., where kids can fish in the stocked pond — with complimentary poles. There is even a chance to set up a tent in your room at The Houstonian Hotel in Houston or have a cart loaded with activities and games delivered to your room at Seattle's Maxwell Hotel.

This summer, opt for a kid-friendly bed & breakfast or inn and you might even get a free tank of gas. Nearly 300 have banded together to help ease the sticker shock at the gas pump with a "[B&Bs kick gas](#)" campaign. Miami, meanwhile, has so many boutique hotels that there is an entire [website](#) devoted to them.

You'll also see a growing number of packages that will include admission to area museums, bike rental shops and even whale-watching excursions. "Absolutely families are an important market for us," said Ingrid Summerfield, president of Joie de Vivre Hospitality group, which operates more than 30 small hotels on the West Coast. "We want to create a more memorable experience."

Borrow a goldfish

Kimpton Hotels, which has 52 properties around the country, making it the largest group of boutique hotels in the country, has responded with a company-wide Kimpton Kids program and an array of family packages and amenities at its city hotels aimed at helping families (and their pooches — the hotels are all dog-friendly) to get out and explore, explains Niki Leondakis, Kimpton's president. There are kids' comment cards inviting them to rank their experience from yummy to yucky, kid-sized robes and concierges briefed on where local families go — from playgrounds to restaurants. Kids can even borrow a goldfish for the night while the hotel restaurants are stressing healthy offerings on the kids' menus.

Leondakis believes it has only been in the past few years that families have embraced boutique hotels, as they recognize what these places have to offer — at Kimpton, for example, free Wi-Fi, free use of the fitness club, afternoon wine (and juice) receptions and baby accoutrements at a price that is comparable, or in some cases less than big chain hotels. Because the hotels are smaller, families feel more comfortable letting even 10-year-olds go up to the room on their own. But most important, she explains, "They are looking for a unique experience and we have gone to great lengths to make it easy to bring kids."

Boutique Caribbean resorts are attracting families too — from the budget friendly 49-room Jakes Hotel in Treasure Beach, Jamaica, (kids' cooking lessons or mosaic tiling workshop?) with rates starting at under \$100 a night to the 89-room Abaco Beach Resort in the Bahamas Out Islands where kids can make "Bahamas Buddies" with local children.

Even small all-inclusives that don't offer kids' programs are increasingly popular with families, like the 88-room Ceiba del Mar Beach and Spa Resort just south of Cancun. "I wouldn't want to sacrifice the intimacy for that," said Suzi Hall, vacationing from Dallas with her family. "This place is great," she said scanning the beach — the comfortable cushioned beach chairs under the thatched coverings, the clear ocean, her 18-month-old daughter happily playing in the sand. The fact that the small resort can't do enough for her family certainly helps.

Watch and walk

In San Francisco, I traded the Diva's coolness for Kimpton's Harbor Court Hotel's homeyness on the Embarcadero, a block from San Francisco's restored Ferry Building and the heart of a growing restaurant scene. I didn't care that the room was small when I could see the Bay Bridge from my window and walk to my favorite farmer's market.

Even better, the wine reception in the living room-like lounge encourages guests to chat and trade travel tips, as does the complimentary coffee in the morning. I pet a guest's dog and talk about my own back home. The front desk clerk greets me by name.

"You just don't get that with some big-box hotel chains," said Kimpton fan Richelle Haas. "We really feel appreciated and welcomed."

And when you're away from home with the kids that counts for a lot.

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