

Club Med "Your Garden Of Earthly Delights"

Okay, gang, quiet in the back, please. This is going to be a rundown on Club Med, aka Club Bacchanal. . . I've got a scuba lesson in 20 minutes, so let me know if I'm going too fast for those of you taking notes.

The official name is Club Mediterranee, a delightfully lulling—if somewhat too long—mouthful that everyone immediately shortens to Club Med.

The Club Med concept got its start just after World War II, when Belgian-born Gerard Blitz rounded up some French friends and they fine-tuned a vacation concept which was—and still is—so simple it's a wonder no one else has copied it. In short, you do what you want and they provide the bunks, burgers, beaches, swimming, tennis, free wine at lunch and dinner, maybe some scuba diving and free golf at a Robert Trent Jones Jr. course. You want it, you get it.

Starting from a modest tent village on the Spanish island of Majorca in 1950, Club Med has grown around the world, including 13 villages in what the company calls the American Zone. There's a ski village at Copper Mountain in Colorado, which will become year-round starting next summer, and there are 12 other villages in the Caribbean, Mexico and Tahiti. Officials are on the prowl for new sites in Florida, Arizona and California.

The rest of the zone includes Fort Royal and Caravelle in Guadeloupe, Buccaneer's Creek in Martinique, Paradise Island and Eleuthera in the Bahamas, Magic Isle in Haiti, Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic; Cancun, Ixtapa and Playa Blanca in Mexico and Moorea and Bora Bora in Tahiti. Club Med also manages five villas near major Mexican archaeological sites, three in the Yucatan and two outside Mexico City, but they're not part of the resort village lineup.

There is a \$30 "membership" for guests, who then are called GMs (gentils membres, or gentle members) by the GOs (gentils organisateurs, or gentle organizers). There is no cash at the villages; all payments are made in beads, with boutique or other minor purchases such as postcards, cigarettes or suntan lotion in the small store signed to your room. And there is no tipping.

"You are going to be pampered, only in a different way," says Bonnie Pollack, 42 and a mother of three. She and her husband, Art, hit their fourth village in the last couple of years this summer.

"Every village is different and Club Med isn't for everyone," she says, but it's an awful lot of fun, whether you join in or go off by yourself and take it easy.

"It takes you about two or three days to get into the swing of things, but then you're really into it and you decide what you want to do. The really nice thing is that even though they encourage you to participate in the different activities, there isn't any real pressure. And there's no social pressure because it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor back home, because at Club Med all you've got are the beads. There aren't any special tables at the meals, no front-row box seats and who are you going to impress because you might have some extra beads?"

Club Med's tag line in its advertising is "your garden of earthly delights." In other words, flee from alleged "progress" by getting back to the basics; it's not quite a loaf of bread, a jug of wine and . . . but it's certainly a lot more enjoyable than becoming a hermit, which is the only other way one might escape the daily routine back home.

At Club Med, it's individuality at each village, depending on the site.

Eleuthera, for instance, has the Atlantic, an immense dog-leg shaped pool and its own

marina on the other side of the island, while Paradise Island is a conversion of an elaborate estate. Haiti is right on the Bay of Gonave, while Punta Cana is on the channel between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, 90 miles away; it has a pool plus a unique "shade beach" among palm trees that were specially planted by using a jackhammer to chisel holes in the coral. Playa Blanca is a hillside village that tumbles down to a palm-studded cove, while Fort Royal mixes bungalows and a hotel, plus two beaches.

Apart from the smorgasbord of activities—or the opportunity to simply plop down poolside or on a beach and soak up some "bennies" (beneficial sun rays)—there are no televisions, no radios, no newspapers and barely a phone link to "real life."

The French-run company is making a determined effort to knock down the mistaken image of the villages as rowdy pens by courting the family vacation market with the introduction of special Mini Clubs at various villages. There is one program for youngsters 4 to 6 and a Kids Club for children 7 to 14; sometimes, though, the specially trained staff allows a child to "float" between the two programs if for instance, a 6-year-old is advanced enough to participate in some of the activities of the older group. Maybe water skiing is too strenuous, but archery, swimming or circus skills might be fine. The newest Mini Club is at Eleuthera, with a second Mini Club at Fort Royal in Guadeloupe and a third at the Club's Copper Mountain village. There are 36 Mini Clubs worldwide.

Eleuthera has become a showcase for the program, with special workshops in circus activities in conjunction with Florida State University's crackerjack Flying-High Circus troupe, computers and a video workshop

in which the older kids write, direct and act in their own skits, which are videotaped daily.

"It's a perfect setup," says Bob Gibson, a housing contractor who vacationed at Eleuthera with his wife, Peggy, and their two daughters. "Peggy and I have time together and then we have time with the girls, too. The Mini Club staff is terrific in the way they handle the kid, supervising them and leading them in the various activities."

The minimum age for children at Club Med is 6, but it has been rolled back two years to four at the Mini Clubs at Fort Royal and Eleuthera, five years at Copper Mountain's Mini Club. The age barrier remains official, although it's sometimes winked at. One other nice aspect of the Mini Clubs is that they provide a ready stable of late-night babysitters.

Didier Domingue, who helped introduce Mini Clubs to several villages, says there are ongoing modifications at each village.

"It's not always the same. We experiment everywhere, try to see what works and what doesn't," he says.

"We have to make sure that what the Mini Club staff does will be acceptable. At a summer camp, for instance, the parents may only get to see their child once or twice on special weekends, so even if they complain about something, the parents are gone at the end of the day or the weekend. Here, the parents are with the children every day and we can't have them unhappy."

At Eleuthera, for example, the day's agenda starts at 9 a.m., runs until a special early lunch (ahead of the adult sitdowns), then on through the afternoon with parents picking up their children at 5.30 to get them ready for another early meal for the

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