

## The Toughest Guest: a Teen



Sandy Huffaker for The Wall Street Journal (2)

### ▲ THE BEACH CAN WAIT

Kids compete for a sundae, the prize for winning the Wii Teen Challenge at the Loews Coronado Bay Resort near San Diego.

### Hotels Try to Make Family Trips Fun; Mocktails Are OK, Dark Bonfires Aren't

By ANDREA PETERSEN

For teenagers on summer vacation with their families, there seems to be a universal goal: Ditching the parents.

Hotels and resorts are trying to make that easier by offering souped-up teen programs—with Wii contests, sushi-making lessons and poker nights—as well as dedicated hang-out spots for the under-18 set. Think video games and “mocktails.”

While hotels and resorts have long offered activities geared to younger children, companies are now realizing they need to offer

something fun, and safe, for teens, especially if they want to hold onto families whose kids have aged out of the children's programs. Resorts are also finding that bored teens hanging around the lobby isn't so desirable. Before Beaches Turks & Caicos Resort Villages & Spa extended the hours of its teen program last summer to 1:30 a.m. instead of 11 p.m., “kids would be wandering around the property aimlessly,” says Joel Ryan, group manager for entertainment at Sandals Resorts International, which owns Beaches properties in the Caribbean. “They would take pool chairs and throw them in the pool.”

The Renaissance Esmerelda Resort & Spa in Indian Wells, Calif., started in March turning over its new adult nightclub to 12- to 17-

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At the Montage Laguna Beach in California, Conner Johnson paddle boards one recent Friday.



At the Montage Laguna Beach's casino night, teens play Uno, making bets with Skittles candy, above. An illustration of Atlantis' planned teen club with a 'gaming tree,' above right.

# Hotels Try to Win Over the Toughest Guests: Teens

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year-olds during the day. For \$40, kids get access to computers loaded with 150 video games and unlimited pizza and soda. Beaches Turks & Caicos has an outpost of Scratch DJ Academy, a New York-based DJ school, to teach kids how to spin vinyl. Last year, it opened "Trench Town," a no-parents-allowed lounge with arcade games, black lights and murals painted by a New York graffiti artist.

This summer, the teen beach cabana at the Loews Miami Beach Hotel (designed by Williams-Sonoma Inc.'s PBteen home-furnishings brand) is hosting Wii contests and offering mocktails such as mojitos, daiquiris and margaritas, all sans alcohol.

And this winter, Atlantis, Paradise Island in the Bahamas, is planning to open a massive teen club. The \$10 million, 14,000 square-foot spot will include its own teen-only branch of Starbucks, an Internet lounge, a video-game room with a floor-to-ceiling "gaming tree" with 32 monitors, and a dance club with its own bouncers and roving paparazzi.

Teens say that the new activities and lounges not only give them a much-needed break from vacation-forced family togetherness, but also help them meet people their own age. "We were

from Vancouver, British Columbia, on a recent afternoon at the PBteen lounge at the Loews Coronado Bay Resort near San Diego, Calif. "Maybe we'll hang out later." Kristoff and his brother Madison, 13, were taking part in the "Wii Teen Challenge" along with nine other kids, including a few pint-sized under-10 crashers. (First prize was a sundae.) "It is hard finding activities for this age group," said Sophie Duxbury, Kristoff and Madison's mother. "This is a lifesaver."

Parents are more likely to travel with their kids and to give them a big say in deciding where to go. (A week with a miserable, eye-rolling teen is no vacation.) Families are particularly attractive for hotels because they tend to stay longer and rack up bigger bills. While business travelers stay an average of 1.2 nights, families on their big annual vacation stay about 4.3 nights, says Bjorn Hanson, a hospitality professor at the Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University.

Teens are among a hotel's toughest customers: They will skip any program that resembles a children's camp or activity that seems remotely un-cool. The Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa in San Antonio, Texas, axed scavenger hunts and "ice-breaker" games after kids



The Beaches resorts host events like this 'dive-in' movie for teens.

ndy Goeken, a hotel spokeswoman. The program has been much more popular since it dropped most organized activities and instead simply provides video games, Internet access and a "place where [teens] can just be," she says.

The Montage Laguna Beach, an ocean-front resort in Laguna Beach, Calif., started offering stand-up paddle board lessons, beach volleyball games and weekend theme parties for teens this past Memorial Day weekend. Jake Wasserkrug says he won't be anywhere near the activities, even though the 16-year-old loved the resort's children's club, "Paintbox," when he was younger. "Even if it was fun, I

erson, Nev., earlier this month at the Montage with his parents, brother, two friends and cousins.

The key to attracting teens, some hotels say, is giving them grown-up experiences—and setting limits. When Atlantis did a focus group with 50 teenagers earlier this year to find out what they wanted in a new teen club, the participants asked for the oversized beds popular in some adult spots, hot tubs and "cages to dance in," says Amanda Felts, vice president of guest activities and resort planning. "That's not going to happen."

The Montage Laguna Beach has had success with a "casino" night where kids sip "teentails" such as Shirley Temple

a table getting ready to play Texas hold 'em in one of the hotel's beige-carpeted meeting rooms. (Inflatable dice and handmade posters saying "Mteens Casino Night" tried to liven it up.) One attendee, Leigha Mamula, asked for a refresher on the game's rules.

"But you're from Vegas," protested John Gallagher, 14.

"So?, said Leigha. "I'm 12, not 21."

While hotels say they want to give kids independence and a good time, they try to prevent mischief. When the Beaches Turks & Caicos throws nighttime bonfires on the beach, for example, the beach is lit up and counselors and security guards are stationed around. The designer of the new Atlantis teen club, Jeffrey Beers, said he made sure there were no "dark, hidden areas" where teens could sneak off and make out. Most hotels also employ software to control which websites kids can visit in teen lounges and edit the music collection to keep it PG-rated.

One way to up attendance at teen programs is to bribe the kids. At Beaches Negril Resort & Spa in Jamaica, teens earn points for each activity. They can cash them in for access to "VIP cabanas" during teen dance nights at the resort's Club Liquid. The Basin Harbor Club in

Challenges including, "Perform in the talent show" and "Dance...with grandma." The resort is hoping the program will boost last summer's attendance rate when only 15% to 20% of teen guests took part in its organized teen activities, says Jennifer Wyman, director of programming and public relations at the resort.

The Winnetu Oceanside Resort in Edgartown, Mass., sends the "coolest" counselor to scope out the pools and invite teens to attend the hotel's program, says Tammy Moreis, activities director for the Martha's Vineyard resort. "I get one of the most active, fun counselors to really talk it up. [Teens] usually want to hang out with them."

Still, Ms. Moreis says there's always the danger that an activity will be taken down by the too-cool-for-it teen. "I could have 10 kids sign up and one can walk in and say, 'that's stupid' and every single one of them will follow," and leave," she says.

And if a teen program is too compelling, there is a downside: Parents who have spent time and money to take a family vacation may rarely see their child. The teen program at the Beaches resorts, for example, keeps kids busy from 10 a.m. to 1:30 a.m., including during mealtimes. Counselors will, however, try to coax kids into at least a little