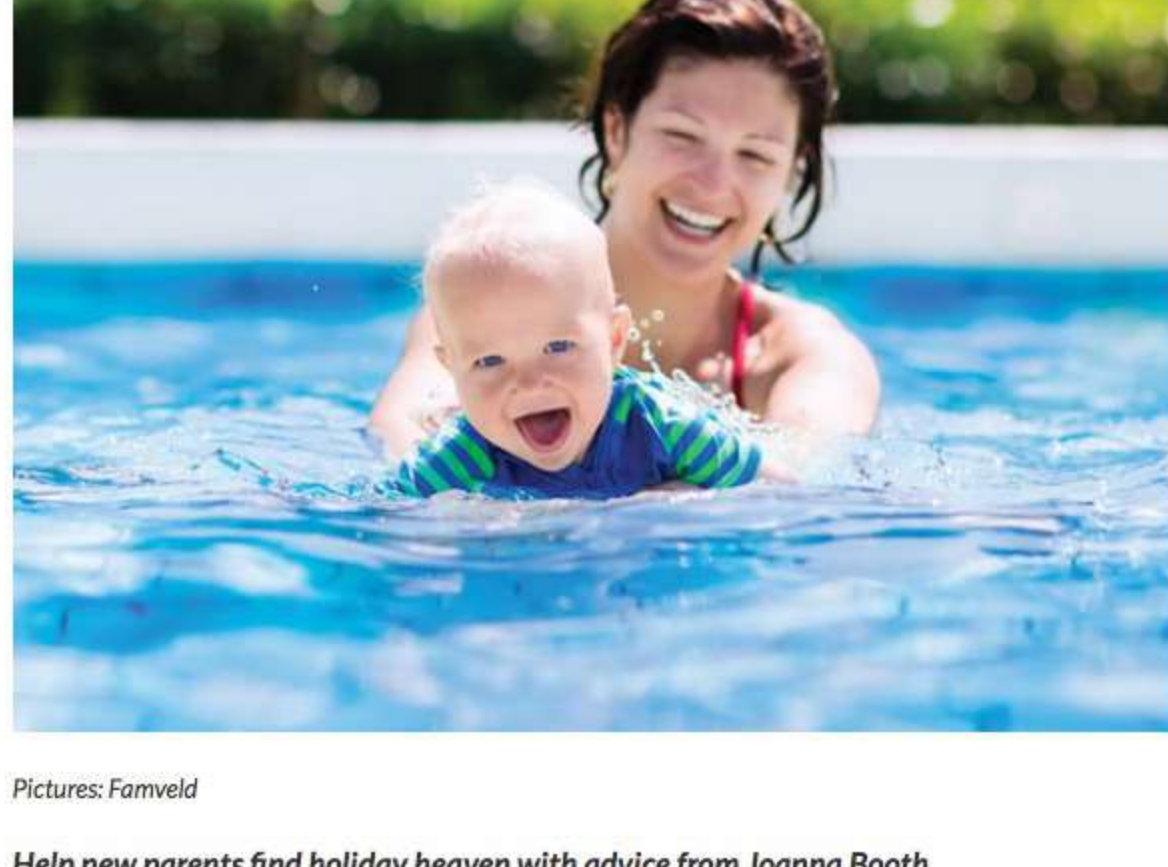


Baby travel: Find your holiday heaven

by Joanna Booth Aug 9th 2017, 12:56



Pictures: Famveld

Help new parents find holiday heaven with advice from Joanna Booth.

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"Ooh, haven't you grown?"

Being on the receiving end of this comment with baffling regularity as a child, I vowed never to make it myself.

But then people I knew started to have kids, and I was struck with the terrifying pace at which they change.

This factor can make booking holidays with children that much more challenging. A child of six is a very different beast from a six-month-old, and the two have very different needs.

The world isn't short of hotels with kids' clubs offering elaborate activities, cuddly characters that make the rounds at breakfast, and labyrinthine water slides. Yet all this is of only passing interest to the parents of a six-month-old, who really want to know how they're going to sterilise a bottle, whether they'll be able to find a properly vetted babysitter and if their room has a decent balcony so they can enjoy a well-deserved sunbathe during naptime.

Finding hotels that suit the needs of parents travelling with babies may be trickier than for older families, but there's good news too: for once, you're not corralled into the hellish confines – and higher prices – of school holidays.

Getting there

Start nervous family flyers off with a short-haul flight, and remind them they have extra baggage allowance both in the hold and as carry-on. They can even take their buggy right to the gate to transport it all.

Advise bringing plenty of snacks – baby milk and food will be checked at security – and something to pass the time, especially for older babies. Books, small toys and special baby apps on phones or tablets are particularly helpful in the confined space of an aircraft.

Suggest a nappy change just before boarding, and that parents are prepared with a dummy, bottle or breastfeeding at take off and landing, in case the pressure change causes pain in their baby's ears.

When it comes to travelling on from the airport, parents may want to bring their own car seat as part of the baby's luggage allowance. If not, it's worth getting car hire and transfer providers to be very specific about which car seats they can guarantee, to ensure it will be the correct fit for smaller babies.



What to pack

Babies need a bewildering amount of paraphernalia, but it's possible to minimise what parents need to take with them by looking out for hotels that can provide a whole host of baby items on arrival – far more than the cot and high chair that you'd expect as standard.

Savvy hotels have started branding this service. Porto Elounda in Crete, where it's just been introduced, calls it Baby Travels Light. At Thanos Hotels & Resorts in Cyprus, it's Baby Go Lightly. At Martinhal's Portugal hotels, it's Baby Concierge. Thomson Family Life hotels just call it Baby Equipment. The services function in the same way – allowing clients to pre-book a range of amenities, from nappy bins and sterilisers to bouncers and toys, plus sometimes baby milk powder, nappies and even buggies, for their stay, so it's possible for parents to travel without looking like they're emigrating. A slightly more limited, but free, service is offered at Sardinia's Chia Laguna.

However, it's worth bringing some familiar items to help the baby settle in – favourite toys, a nightlight from their room at home, and baby wipes and creams if the child has sensitive skin.



Room choice

This is not the time to suggest hotel hopping. Many babies will take a few days to settle in to a new environment, so staying in one hotel for the entire holiday makes sense.

Clients may wish to book interconnecting rooms, but with a small baby, many parents will – for both cost and peace-of-mind reasons – ask for a cot in their own room.

It's worthwhile looking at larger room categories and suites to ensure there's plenty of space for everyone. This is where all-suite hotels such as Princesa Yaiza in Lanzarote come into their own – and a decent balcony can make naptimes and evenings pleasurable times for sunbathing and sipping wine, rather than having to tiptoe around in semi-darkness trying not to wake junior.

Little touches can make a big difference. Some hotels, including Thanos Hotels' Anassa, will fit blackout curtains to windows, and NH Hotels' Families Welcome initiative means family rooms offer early check in and late check out, so guests aren't left hanging around reception with a baby.



Childcare

Kids' clubs can give frazzled parents a welcome break, so ensuring childcare is available from the correct age is paramount. Beaches resorts have an infants' programme for newborns up to 24 months, running from 9am to 9pm. Club Med and Mark Warner offer creche facilities for four to 23-month-olds at some resorts, for an extra charge. Neilson's Starfish Crèche caters for a similar age range, with hours running until 11pm two evenings a week. Crèches for infants from four months are also available in Greece at Sani Resorts, Ikos Resorts, Domes of Elounda and MarBella Corfu; at Anassa and Almyra in Cyprus; at Anantara Vilamoura in Portugal; and at Princesa Yaiza in Lanzarote. Creche facilities at Portugal's Martinhal hotels are available for babies aged six months and over.

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Even though parents will probably become well acquainted with the room service menu, many will want to have the odd richly deserved night out. So ensure babysitting is offered, and check the price and how the staff are vetted.

It can be worth suggesting parents allow their baby to settle in to the hotel environment for a few days before trying a babysitter or creche, to avoid any distress.



Eating

Before they're weaned, babies' eating habits are relatively simple, once you've sourced baby milk and sterilising equipment for those who are bottle-fed. But parents travelling with babies over six months will need baby foods of some sort, most often purees, until their child is ready to eat off a kids' menu. Guests at properties including Porto Sani, Anassa and Martinhal hotels can order freshly made purees in the restaurants, and at Domes of Elounda, there's a fresh baby-food station.

Hotel buffet breakfasts are brilliant for weaning babies, with a wide variety of finger foods for them to experiment with, and someone else to clear up the mess at the end.

Entertainment

The very tiniest babies will be happy to roll about on a playmat in the shade, but slightly older tots will need a little more, particularly once they're on the move.

Some hotels will provide age-appropriate toys and books in the room when requested, and looking for play and entertainment facilities outside the kids' club, so that there's something for parents to do together with their child. Kids' pools are all well and good, but indoor, as well as outdoor, options are useful, as babies burn easily.

Princesa Yaiza in Lanzarote has a huge soft-play area in the heart of the hotel with sections suited to different age groups, and Kikoland, a kids' complex where the under-twos' area has a shallow pool and a swing. MarBella Corfu runs Aqua Baby classes for those from three to 12 months, and Martinhal Cascais has more than 2,300sq m of playgrounds dotted around the hotel, plus heated and unheated pools.

Ask the expert

Debbie Goffin, head of sales and marketing, Premier Holidays

"When it came to flying with my own babies, I always prepared for the worst, but hoped for the best – and nine times out of 10, everything went smoothly. Advise clients to stick to the same routine they have at home. Pack sachets of Calpol, and their own food and milk in case of delays, or pick up supplies from Boots at the airport. Parents should pack a change of clothes for themselves, as well as the baby."

How to sell

Don't be afraid to suggest going long haul. Provided parents are happy to take on the flight, pre-school years can be a good time to take advantage of off-peak rates for more exotic destinations, before they're tied in to travelling only in school holidays.