

All-Inclusive Resort Vacations: What's to Know?

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All-inclusive vacations are the hot ticket these days. They offer a resort experience chockfull of amenities and activities -- all for one price upfront. In some cases, everything from transportation to tips are included, so you know exactly how much your vacation will cost before you even arrive. This is especially nice for newlyweds, who have better things to do on their vacation than count pennies and balance their checkbooks.

But are “all-inclusive” vacations *really* all inclusive? In fact, the “all” part of the all-inclusive vacation can vary widely from one resort to another. Each property determines the features included in its packages, and many websites offer “all-inclusive” deals that in fact include only air transportation, transfers and accommodations. Whether it's from well meaning friends and relatives or from websites that don't tell the whole story, a couple can arrive at their all inclusive resort to find that many of the items that they assumed would be included- aren't! I've been to dozens of all inclusive resorts and no two were alike. In my experience it pays to look before you leap.

Here is what can you expect from a typical all-inclusive package.

Accommodations -Yes, your lodging is included in the package, but the price will depend on such things as the size and location of the room (e.g., garden, ocean-view or beachfront) and any special features such as a hot tub, plunge pool or butler service. Things to be careful of with booking your room include whether the resort utilizes a towel card system (lost towels can incur hefty charges), a fee for use of the in room safe, resort fee's and if there is a complimentary mini bar, how often it is stocked and with what beverages for the All- Inclusive price. Some

resorts may also charge extra for special requests, like afternoon housekeeping service on those days you want to sleep in.

Dining - Most all-inclusive resorts include meals. Some have a buffet for all meals and others have several a la carte restaurants and/or snack bars for you to choose from. These venues usually include Asian, Mexican, gourmet and Italian cuisines. Generally speaking, the larger the resort, the more options there will be for dining.

The quality of the food can make or break a vacation – even a honeymoon -- so make sure the resort offers the kind of food that makes you happy. After all, no amount of champagne and caviar is going to satisfy you if what you really want is a burger and fries. And don't be surprised to find that if the majority of guests are European that the the food choices cater to their taste buds! I once was very disappointed that at an all- inclusive resort I stayed at in Jamaica did not offer jerk chicken but did have a wide variety of British food!

Three things to ask:

- Does the all-inclusive package allow dining at *any* of the resort's restaurants or are your choices limited by, say, the length of your stay or your room category?
- Is room service included in the package? If yes, is it available 24 hours a day or only during specified hours?
- Are gourmet foods and specialty dishes (like vegetarian and low-carb meals) included in the package? If not, can they be purchased for a fee?

Bar service- All beverages, including beer, wine, and cocktails, are usually available free of charge, but your selection may be limited. Some resorts serve only a small selection of domestic brands; others may offer premium brands with the package or at an additional charge. If you care what you drink, or you want a celebratory glass of champagne every night, check to see whether it is included.

Sports activities - Tennis, volleyball and fitness-center facilities are almost always included in all-inclusive packages, and most all-inclusive beach resorts offer non-motorized watersports like windsurfing, kayaking, snorkeling, water trykes and sailing free of charge. Of course, the beach offerings depend on the beachfront. If a resort is located in an area that typically has rough water, watersports may be restricted some or all of the time (generally, red flags are raised when an activity is prohibited). There may be other restrictions, as well. Some resorts require an orientation before you can use the equipment, others have a time limit; some also require a refundable cash deposit. Expect to pay extra for pricier sporting activities like golf, horseback riding, JetSkiing, parasailing, and offshore fishing and scuba diving.

Entertainment - Many all-inclusive resorts include entertainment – everything from hilarious group games organized by the staff to laid-back music performed by a saxophonist during dinner. Many all-inclusive resorts have an onsite disco; admission is usually free and most include drinks. Depending on the destination, there may be an onsite casino; drinks may or may not be included.

One thing comes included with every resort -- whether you want it or not -- and that's the resort's ambience. That ambience can make or break a honeymoon, so pay careful attention to it. Does the resort cater to families, spring breakers or people within your age group? Is the resort for adults only? Is there a big singles crowd? Be very thorough with your research, and try to picture whether the property is suited to your honeymoon dream – whether that is a romantic getaway or a rollicking good time.

Weddings - As part of an All-Inclusive package a wedding may be free and include a coordinator, a few photos, flowers, champagne, music and a wedding cake. These packages usually require that you pay the government /administrative fees. Of course you can always upgrade the package to make it more personalized!

What else should you look for? Other items that may or may not be included: transportation to and from the resort, local sightseeing and excursions outside the resort, spa facilities, Internet service or wireless Internet access, gratuities, and taxes. Spa treatments are usually available for an additional fee. Some resorts will include transportation to nearby “sister properties,” along with food, beverages, and use of all facilities. A few resorts may offer excursions outside the resort or greens fees at local golf courses in their package!

Start with a dream, then make a plan. Honeymoon planning can be overwhelming. It helps to sit down with your fiancée and discuss what each of you envisions for the honeymoon. Identify what features are important to you and what isn't important at all. Keep your expectations realistic to what fits within your budget. Then look carefully at each all-inclusive package and see if it offers what you are looking for. If it doesn't, move onto the next package. After all, no all-inclusive package is truly wonderful unless suits *your* needs.

Two more pieces of advice:

- First, remember the old adage: “You get what you pay for.” Resorts don't give their services away – not even to happy honeymooners, so if an all-inclusive package looks too good to be true, you should be on the lookout for hidden costs and fees. Don't be afraid to ask *exactly* what is included and how much the “extras” will cost.
- Second, consider working with a travel professional that specializes in honeymoons. Generally, using a travel agent will cost the same if not less than booking on the internet however you will gain the expertise and knowledge of a professional. A travel professional is able to sort the information, clarify your expectations, avoid common pitfalls and know who the best supplier is for a particular resort or destination. They will know hundreds of properties – the amenities, food quality, clientele and reputations either from personal experience or their multitude of resources

and training . A good travel agent also knows how to stick to a budget – even if you don't! And here's a bonus: if something should go wrong, you have a consumer advocate on your side who has a great deal of negotiating power.

All-inclusive resort vacations are a good bet for honeymooners. Do your homework before placing your deposit and you will have a great start on your new life together.

About the author: Jennifer Prymula, is certified as a Honeymoon & Destination Wedding Specialist by The Travel Institute, Certified Sandals Specialist, Hawaii Destination Specialist and an Accredited Cruise Counselor. She is a member of the West Michigan Wedding Association and KBA. You can contact Jennifer at 877-208-6639; Jennifer@sandsunandsavings.com or visit her website at www.sandsunandsavings.com

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