

WHAT THE PRESS SAY...

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Chic and child-friendly

Having kids no longer has to mean sacrificing stylish holidays, thanks to a new breed of Mediterranean resort. By Matt Turner

Holidays, as any parent of young children knows, are not what they used to be. When choosing a hotel for a sojourn *en famille*, the Michelin status of the dining options, the thread count of the bed linen, or the sunset potential of the cocktail bar, take a back seat as more prosaic con-

cerns take over. Will the other guests mind your offspring running riot in the restaurant? Are there balconies to fall off, or swimming pools to fall into? Can the kitchens rustle up pasta shapes and tomato sauce at short notice?

But a new breed of hotel is striving to change that, so that the generation who have grown up with chic

boutique hotels no longer have to settle for big, anonymously-designed resorts as soon as they have children.

Martinhal, a hotel and resort which opened fully last month on Portugal's Algarve, typifies the trend. Husband-and-wife team Roman and Chitra Stern first identified the potential of an under-developed area close to the town of Sagres,

while searching for an escape from the rat race.

Their original plan to build and sell a complex of timeshare villas changed when they met Nigel Chapman and Nicholas Dickinson – hoteliers who had already carved out a niche in providing high-end hospitality for families with a group of British hotels including Moonfleet Manor in Dorset, Ickworth House in Sussex and Fowey Hall in Cornwall. Under the Luxury Family Hotels banner, these properties were unique among the country house hotels of England in welcoming younger guests, at a time when most British hoteliers felt children should not be seen, let alone heard.

It's easy to see the appeal of creating a Mediterranean resort along similar lines. And this parcel of land near Sagres, adjoining Praia do Martinhal – the beach from which the resort takes its name – was a rare opportunity to do so. Thanks to the protected status of the Costa Vicentina national park, which surrounds the resort, no further development will be allowed along this stretch of coast.

This is a forgotten corner of the Mediterranean. Just around the bay is the Cabo de São Vicente, where Prince Henry the Navigator established his navigation school in the 15th century.

Perhaps it's the winds which once powered the sails of Portuguese explorers that have deterred developers from blighting the terrain here as they have done elsewhere on the Algarve. Until the recent introduction of an EU-funded *auto-estrada*, few tourists ventured this far from Faro Airport.

But it's clear as we pull up outside the contemporary glass exterior of the main hotel building that Martinhal has the potential to put this place on the map.

A design team from Conran & Partners has landscaped the development sensitively, taking their cue from the low-rise, sustainable resorts of southeast Asia rather than the concrete carbuncles of the Costas. Behind the hotel, a variety of one-, two- or three-bedroom houses comprise the village resort, arranged around a central square and pool areas.

The interiors, by furniture designer Michael Sodeau, also have an organic feel with local stone and timber

used alongside wicker lamps and cork stools.

Even the "Raposinhos" kids' club (the name means "little foxes" in Portuguese) has a smart feel and you are more likely to find upmarket toys from Brio and Magis than "made in China" plastic.

There are restaurants to satisfy children and adults alike. The most formal, O Terraço, offers imaginative takes on traditional Portuguese dishes such as a *cataplana* of black pork with clams, or sea urchin with scrambled eggs. Most families however, will spend their mealtimes torn between the hotel's poolside restaurant As Dunas, and Os Gambozinos, which offers wood-fired pizzas in the resort's village square.

With a hire car, visitors can explore nearby beaches, and the hotel offers bikes to make the inland journey to Sagres. But Martinhal's biggest selling point is the powder-fine sands of the beach on its doorstep, the Praia do Martinhal. Its sheltered location keeps the strongest winds at bay and paddling is safe as long as the life-guards fly the green flag.

For those used to conventional family resorts, Martinhal feels utterly different, but other new European resorts are pursuing a similar idea. Sir Rocco Forte's latest property, the

Verdura, which opened in March in Sicily, has stylish designer interiors by his sister Olga Polizzi alongside sumptuous golfing and spa facilities. But it also offers a special children's pool, activities from tennis to windsurfing, and high-chairs, crayons and Nintendo Wii systems are all at hand. Rooms for guests with children under four are specially "childproofed" before their arrival.

Thanos Hotels' group of award-winning hotels in Paphos, Cyprus combine the traditional design of a Cypriot village with elegant interiors whilst offering a range of facilities for children. And even Club Med is upping its game, with new properties created by well-known French designers such as Jacques Garcia, Didier Gomez and Jean-Philippe Nuel. Perhaps hotels can be chic and child-friendly after all.

Matt Turner is the editor of the hotel design magazine Sleeper

Details

The Ocean Houses at Martinhal cost from €152 (www.martinhal.com). www.verduraresort.com www.thanoshotels.com www.clubmed.com

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Contemporary A beach suite and timber-clad beach rooms at the Martinhal hotel on the Algarve in Portugal