



THE 38-ROOM HOTEL DOESN'T INTRUDE ON THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE, WITH THE OCEAN-FACING TIMBER-CLAD CUBES INDIVIDUALLY DECORATED AND COMPLETELY CHILD-PROOFED.

Family-friendly HEAVEN

NORAH CASEY VISITS MARTINHAL BEACH RESORT IN PORTUGAL'S ALGARVE, WHERE UNDERSTATED LUXURY CREATES A HEAVENLY ESCAPE FOR FAMILIES



When my son Dara was younger I used to dream about a place like Martinhal. Before delving into the many and varied reasons why, let me take you back (those of you who have children) to the days before babies. A time when holidays meant some down-time, lovely food, leisurely conversations, a glass or two of wine and maybe a trip to the sauna...in between long, lazy days soaking up the sun. Fast forward to babydom. And everything changes. Now, like every other new mother, I fully expected that the joy of parenting would come at a price. But I didn't also expect to lose my sense of aesthetic – or love of good food and nice wine (on occasion).

I remember our first holiday, when Dara was just five months old. It brought the realisation that we were now segregated from the rest of society and destined to stay in “family-friendly” resorts and take part in group activities.

Our first escape was to a hellish place in Lanzarote where the cacophony of babies

crying and toddlers shrieking made poolside visits a nightmare. The room was wipe-clean plastic with no soft furnishings to speak of. The hard tiled flooring and sharp-edged furniture was far from child-friendly and the kiddies' menu was processed all the way. Evening meals were spent in silence while Dara slept next to the table – in any case, the food was unspeakably bad. It was the first time we both realised having a baby meant we could kiss goodbye to lovely holidays in gorgeous surroundings – we were now in the mass-market, child-friendly zone. Most of that week away we spent apart – taking turns to mind Dara while the other caught up on sleep. This was not the relaxing trip I imagined and it was a blessed relief to return home.

Before discovering Martinhal, there was only one other place we stayed in the whole of Dara's early childhood that I could describe as truly “family-friendly” – and that was Kelly's Resort in Rosslare.

I still remember the sensation of feeling

absolutely relaxed and pampered in Kelly's – lovely rooms, fantastic food, child-friendly facilities and blissful evenings in the dining room, safe in the knowledge that Dara was being well minded. It was heaven; I thought there couldn't possibly be anywhere better.

So Bill Kelly is going to have to forgive me for saying that I found somewhere that is not only as brilliantly child-friendly as his piece of paradise but it has the edge...because, although Kelly's is in the sunny southeast of Ireland, Portugal trumps it in terms of the sunshine and temperature.

An entrepreneurial couple gave birth to Martinhal after they had a few children of their own and realised there was a huge gap at the high end of the family resort market. Like us, they had experienced one too many all-you-can-eat buffets and the agony of being treated like a pariah if you brought your child to an elegant restaurant.

Roman and Chitra Stern opened the hotel in 2010 after six years' gestation, during which time more babies arrived, as did one of the deepest recessions Europe has ever seen – with Portugal hit even harder than most other countries. But they never wavered and with phenomenal tenacity Chitra stuck to their vision, and didn't scrimp on quality.

“It is about creating moments where the children are happy playing and mum and dad

can enjoy a glass of wine that is still cold or a cappuccino that still has the froth on it. Martinhal is about parents and children enjoying time together without guilt or worry,” Chitra told me.

The result is a remarkable resort – luxurious, child-friendly and located on the spectacular southwestern coastline of Portugal. Perched on a cliff, Mother Nature provides the dramatic backdrop of sweeping sands and sea and the Costa Vicentina Nature Reserve. The hotel is near the historic town of Sagres and Cape St Vincent, known locally as *fim do mundo* (the end of the world) – the furthest point you can go in the southwest of Europe. If your only experience of Portugal has been the more popular resorts of Quinta do Lago, Vilamoura, Albufeira and Portimao this little corner of the country is well worth exploring.

This is a quieter part of Portugal, with beautiful beaches like the stunning Beliche beach. Some are tranquil and perfect for swimming but others, like Tonel beach beneath the cliffs of Ponta de Sagres, deliver dramatic Atlantic waves that attract surfers from all over. Sagres is a picturesque seaside town made famous during the Age of Discoveries by Prince Henry the Navigator, who brought great mariners, astronomers, ship-builders and cartographers to his school of navigation. We had some lovely early evening walks along

the harbour at Baleeira, followed by supper at one of the local restaurants where we sat at wooden tables with local families and ate the best locally caught fish served with the minimum of fuss.

Martinhal's contemporary exterior sets the tone on arrival – beautiful clean lines and glass and wood blend with the rugged wind-swept coastline. Sir Terence Conran's architectural firm designed the hotel and resort to blend with the natural landscape and maximise the vistas of the ocean. The 38-room hotel doesn't intrude on the natural landscape, with the ocean-facing timber-clad cubes individually decorated and completely child-proofed. Each features its own private wooden deck terrace, with views of the Atlantic – perfect for private sun-downers before dinner or sunbathing while the kids take a nap.

We stayed in a lovely Ocean House away from the main hotel (but not too far). There are 55 Ocean Houses at Martinhal, with a choice of two or three bedrooms. The accommodation is upside down, so bedrooms are on the ground floor and the living area and veranda enjoy stunning views of the ocean. Like the rest of the resort, the interior design is clean and contemporary, with muted tones and bold statement pieces. British furniture and interior designer Michael Sodeau designed the public areas and rooms, taking inspiration from the natural beauty of the surrounding area using woods, stone, cork and lots of natural material from Portugal. The result is an elegant understated sophistication that occasionally surprises.

I love statement pieces, so I found myself lingering in the foyer and the dining areas to capture the detail of a light or artistic arrangement I had missed before. It's a lovely, tranquil space that doesn't intrude on the beautiful backdrop of the surrounding countryside.

There are lots of surprisingly practical touches that add to the quirky décor – “Fat



IT IS ABOUT CREATING MOMENTS WHERE THE CHILDREN ARE HAPPY PLAYING AND MUM AND DAD CAN ENJOY A GLASS OF WINE THAT IS STILL COLD OR A CAPPUCCINO THAT STILL HAS THE FROTH ON IT.

Boy” bean bags feature large – in living spaces, on the veranda and at the poolside and beach. I’d forgotten how perfect they are for wriggling babies or tired toddlers – the teenager and I made good use of them too. A great team of people work at Martinhal and you can tell that the owners have worked hard to ensure that the service is as high quality as the décor. The staff is charming, helpful and attentive and contributed significantly to the homely feel of Martinhal.

We were in Martinhal for a week and enjoyed a mix of active days and chillout pool time. And although the resort is a gift for parents of young children, myself and Dara felt equally at home. Two other friends had joined us for the week and they stayed in one of the hotel rooms – which are quieter and cater more to adults. There is plenty to do if you want to be active.

There are five swimming pools, all heated (including an indoor pool) on the grounds of the resort as well as a tennis and sports club (Club 98) and football pitch. The gym is well equipped and the Water Sports Centre can organise a range of activities from surfing to kayaking. We hired bikes from an impressive array and headed out into the countryside for a couple of day trips. There are also activity weeks for yoga, wellness or walking and so on – check out the website for an up-to-date programme of events.

As you would expect, Martinhal boasts exceptionally good facilities for younger children. When I visited the Raposinhos (little fox) children’s club there were some very happy toddlers painting and playing. There is also a crèche, babysitting facilities and a baby concierge service which provides a range of pre-bookable equipment such as potties, bottle sterilisers, baby cots and even push chairs – so you don’t have to take everything with you.

For teenagers, the Blue Room provides a

welcome respite from annoying adults, with video games, table tennis and pool table.

We also enjoyed days when the only choice after breakfast was whether we would laze at the pool or the beach. Finisterra spa is one of the gems of the resort and well worth a visit (sauna and steam rooms are complimentary). The treatment rooms are arranged around a private indoor garden so it feels like an oasis of calm.

I always feel sorry for the massage therapist who gets to try to unknit my shoulder and neck muscles. I spend far too much time hunched over the laptop (moreso in the pre-holiday panic) and I don’t do nearly enough stretches and exercises to ease it on a day-to-day basis. What I really long for are the magical benefits of a really good massage by an exceptional therapist. Martinhal didn’t disappoint. I had a relaxing massage using the therapeutic aromatic oils from Voya, so that for a few blissful days I had some respite – until I started to pound the keyboard again.

Most days in the late afternoon I retreated to the sun-drenched veranda of our Ocean House for the last couple of hours of daylight – reading in blissful solitude. Dara, who has recently adopted a vampire-like aversion to sun and daytime hours, was content to sprawl on the comfy sofa while watching TV (still close enough to his mum for those essential moments when the biscuits are just out of reach or the remote goes missing).

Martinhal was the perfect respite for myself and Dara – I only wish there had been somewhere like it available when he was younger. I find myself encouraging friends with young children to spend some time there to truly experience a restful holiday with time together – and time apart, without the guilt and stress.

And watch this space because Roman and Chitra Stern aren’t done yet – while I was there they were busy planning the first child-friendly city hotel in Lisbon. ■

MARTINHAL DINING OPTIONS

Martinhal has several restaurants, all offering dedicated menus for babies and older children but equally pleasing for adults.

■ **O TERRAÇO** The more formal dining option at Martinhal and situated on the first floor of the hotel with beautiful sea views (and also where breakfast is served). The food was exceptionally good and, as well as some great steak dinners and wonderful Portuguese wines, we enjoyed a special tasting dinner prepared by one of Portugal’s leading chefs, Joachim Koerper (currently the chef at Lisbon’s Eleven restaurant).

■ **AS DUNAS** At the beachfront, As Dunas serves fresh local fish and regional specialities. One of the best parts of As Dunas (apart from lingering long after the meal ends, enjoying a final glass of wine) was inspecting the day’s catch and choosing which fish we would have, the relative flavours and size and how it would be cooked – nothing was too much trouble for the staff.

■ **OS GAMBOZINOS** An Italian restaurant serving fresh salads, pastas and pizza – and it also does a takeaway menu which the teenager availed of one of the evenings.

THAT LITTLE EXTRA TOUCH...*Our Ocean House fridge had a fully equipped kitchen, including a Nespresso coffee machine, and was stocked with complimentary water and essentials (bread, coffee, muffins) to get us started. It also features an MP3 docking station, 32in flatscreen TV with video on demand and internet access. I loved the fact that it also included a little bit of home in the form of toiletries from Voya (Sligo-based organic seaweed cosmetics company). The onsite grocery store in The Village Square was an added bonus for drinks and snacks.*

ACCOMMODATION: We stayed in a two-bedroomed Ocean House which is part of Martinhal Village. You can also choose to stay at the resort’s Bay, Garden or Pinewood Houses, or in one of the main hotel rooms. The resort also features independently-owned luxury villas which are available for rent, with private outside space – and, in some cases, a private swimming pool.

GETTING THERE: There are regular flights to Faro with both Aer Lingus and Ryanair. We opted for a transfer from the airport to the hotel (around an hour-and-a-half road trip) rather than hiring a car. However the next time we would definitely opt to hire a car (very reasonable rates ranging from €80 to €100 for three days).

THE IRISH CONNECTION: There is a strong connection between Martinhal and Ireland – not only through the resort’s use of Irish-owned Voya products, but the Stern family also own Liss Ard, a 185-acre estate near Skibbereen in West Cork, where you can stay in the majestic Country House or the Lake Lodge. lissardestate.com.

Special Easter Packages are available, with prices, for example, for a Beach Room at the hotel starting from €126 per adult per night (half board), including a child up to 12 years of age. Tel: 0035 128 224 0200; martinhal.com