

Travel

Top All-Inclusive Warm-Weather Vacations

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Forget the plastic beads and all-you-can-eat buffets. All-inclusive resorts are going luxury.



In Depth: Top All-Inclusive Warm-Weather Vacations

A no-expenses-barred winter vacation is tempting enough in a year that isn't [marred by stock losses](#) and layoffs. This year, when more than three quarters of Americans reported experiencing significant stress over money and the economy, according to the American Psychological Association's annual Stress in America survey, the urge to get away may be all but impossible to suppress.

But after two nights at the Ritz Carlton in Grand Cayman (\$1,518), two six-course tasting menus with wine pairings at the island's top restaurant, Blue (\$402) and greens fees at the Jack Nicklaus-designed course Britannia (\$100 per person), you could end up with something almost as scary as a notice from your company's HR department: an enormous bill.

Enter the luxury all-inclusive. Guests at these little slices of heaven--they're no longer wholly considered a purgatory of mediocrity--can indulge as much as they want in everything from lobster to cocktails to local excursions, all without the threat of a constantly increasing tab.

Though not traditionally a luxury product, all-inclusive resorts are experiencing an upswing in visits by wealthy customers, driven by the poor economy, according to Milton Pedraza, CEO of affluence research firm the Luxury Institute.

"There's tremendous popularity and demand for all-inclusives right now," he says. "The perception is that these hotels are a better deal."

In other words, a set price does wonders for easing the minds of financially anguished travelers who truly need to relax.

A Tough Transition

Tapping into the luxury market has not been easy for all-inclusives, which are saddled with stereotypes about garish plastic armbands and warmed-over buffet-style meals. "When you tell somebody they're staying in an all-inclusive resort it has somewhat of a déclassé meaning," says Martin Rapp, senior vice president of leisure travel for New York-based luxury travel company Altour. "That can make it hard to attract affluent guests."

Wendy Eardley, assistant manager of [Curtain Bluff](#) in Antigua, one of the first luxury all-inclusives, says the problem may have to do with the idea of getting something for nothing. "Sometimes people think getting so much means there's something wrong," she says.

Eardley would know. Though slightly more expensive than a night at Grand Pineapple Beach Resort (\$462 for an ocean-view-room all-inclusive) in Long Bay, Antigua, Curtain Bluff's \$995-per-night package buys a deluxe beachfront room, three gourmet meals a day, [afternoon tea](#), premium drinks, scuba diving and room service--which would cost substantially more if all were purchased separately.

Unfavorable stereotypes notwithstanding, luxury all-inclusives continue to spring up. The last few years alone have seen the opening of two new resorts on the Mexican Riviera from luxury all-inclusive chain [Secrets](#); three Grand Iberostars in Jamaica, the [Dominican Republic](#) and Tenerife; and the luxury boutique resort Sivory in the Dominican Republic--all high-tourism locations that are home to many traditional all-inclusives, like the Superclubs and Beaches brands. The difference is that the luxury properties embrace quality over quantity, from name-brand architecture to five-star food.

[Round Hill Hotel and Villas Resort](#) in Montego Bay, Jamaica, for instance, offers an optional all-inclusive plan. But unlike other all-inclusives, which often are showy new building complexes, Round Hill is an 18th-century sugar plantation renovated by designer Ralph Lauren. (Oceanfront rooms start at \$800 a night, all-inclusive.)

Similarly, boutique hotel Sivory eschewed the sprawling all-inclusive campus for a smaller, more intimate setting (\$750 per night for a luxury oceanfront junior suite, an additional \$150 per person per night for the all-inclusive plan).

Many of the high-end all-inclusives also offer food a la carte rather than all-you-can-eat, circumventing another negative stereotype: that of the undiscerning, gluttonous tourist. Curtain Bluff, for example, employed French and Swiss chefs from the moment it opened. The current executive chef, French-born Christophe Blatz, trained under multi-Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse.

Customized Packages

Other hotels are escaping the low-class notion by offering ultra-luxurious services you wouldn't ordinarily find on an all-inclusive menu. In addition to meals, packages at [Half Moon](#) in Jamaica offer customized extras, from massages and facials in the Perfectly Pampered package (\$3,520 for three nights in a deluxe suite) to horseback riding and golf greens fees in the Ultimate in Luxury package (\$1,180 per night for a deluxe suite).

And hotels like [Royal Plantation](#) in Jamaica and [Paradisus Palma Real](#) in Punta Cana even offer guests a signature "pillow menu" from which they can choose the most comfortable way to sleep.

Even properties not initially designed to be all-inclusive are offering add-on options like free meals, parking or spa treatments with the aim of nabbing travelers who want a set price up front. According to Rapp, this snares customers about as well as lowering rates, without hurting the resort's bottom line.

"Once you lower rates, if the economy recovers, it's very hard to raise them again," Rapp says. "If you're offering add-ons instead, you're not really lowering the rates, so you can go back to your previous prices that much easier."

Despite the improvements and the wallet-friendly prices, all-inclusive resorts are not perfect for everybody. People who prefer to experience local culture on their own may feel stifled in the confines of an all-inclusive complex. Foodies, too, may feel restricted by short wine lists and limited restaurant options.

But especially in locations where guests feel uncertain about local food choices or uncomfortable leaving the resort--especially in some of the more economically disadvantaged Caribbean islands where all-inclusives flourish--the everything's-included style of vacation can deliver a luxury experience for a reasonable price.