

# LEARNING TO LOVE ... a beach resort

Rob McGibbon took his reluctant wife and 10-year-old son to Mark Warner's Phokaia Beach Resort in Turkey

In recent years, I have on occasion gently floated the idea of an all-inclusive resort holiday to my wife. Anyone would think I had kicked sand in her eyes.

"A package holiday, to a resort? They're expensive prisons with pools – and full of *English* people. How is *that* travelling?" She is prone to talk in italics, but her summary is difficult to dispute. I sort of feel the same. Hence, our holidays have always taken the self-organised route – surfing in Portugal, historical treks in Crete, off-trail around Sardinia, skiing in Norway.

These have indeed been memorable trips but fixing all the bits yourself is tedious, dispiriting graft at the online coalface. I stupidly begin by keying in "luxury family" (eight grand for a week, anyone?) and then your eyes glaze over green as reality sets in. Booking a week's holiday on a medium budget (£3,000+) in August feels like a self-inflicted credit rating check. The compromises are emotional sunburn.

It's amazing how slim on the ground the desirable options can be, especially when I insist that self-catering is off the menu. We do that for the other 51 weeks. Besides, the beds, the pillows, they're always so disgusting. As for the daily trip to a supermarket – that's not travelling, that's life.

Last winter, I put a sheepskin slipper down. We're going to spend a bit more (£4,000+) and go to a resort – because I need a break. The main reason for that rests with our son, Joseph, who is 10. He's a wonderful hand-grenade of energy. On holiday, the detonation pin flicks off around 8am and the explosion fizzes until about 10pm. When you're the go-to mate in a

remote hotel with a rubbish pool devoid of kids, or that guy digging a hole on the beach, as well as the designated holiday driver, the days are unrelenting.

I showed my wife the photos of Phokaia Beach Resort, Mark Warner's new destination on the far west coast of Turkey. She groaned. She's an artist, who likes culture, authenticity, and a market with gap-toothed farmers selling muddied vegetables. Throw in some dark churches and a dusty ruin and she'll hand out five stars. Pictures of plastic sailing boats on a gorgeous beach, pink tennis courts and a paddleboard for two do not float her lilo.

Then I directed her uninterested gaze to a group of smiling children being entertained by fit young adults in matching red polo shirts and khaki shorts. Exhausted by wet London, school, homework, housework – me – she saw the headline 'Kidz Club' and replied wearily: "I get it. Let's go."

The first thing I loved was the lack of grunt work. One call, one credit card number and a voucher arrived by email. The demeaning hustle for cheap Ryanair flights that DO NOT exist never materialised. We're going on British Airways – with 23kg each in the hold included. Ooh, fancy.

After arriving at Izmir airport, we boarded our coach ("Are these the people we will be locked up with?") and as it pulled away I inwardly celebrated the tranquility of the moment. Normally, I would be on a collision course for the first holiday argument caused by getting lost immediately after leaving the car rental park. Of course, never my fault.

Any negative fears about Phokaia



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slipped away upon arrival. It was late, but we were greeted by a smiling mix of Turkish and British staff. Joseph saw the vast stretch of pool – an impressive 50 metres – and muttered in wonder, "Dad – luxury". Bless.

For the price, our room was small, and our bathroom with its flooding shower tray needed a re-fit, but the rest of the hotel was spacious and welcoming. The Turkish staff were warm and faultless, as were the Mark Warner team. Our fellow guests were also a surprisingly chipper bunch, despite their overwhelming Englishness.

On the first morning, Joseph flip-flopped off to Kidz Club without a backwards glance. We next saw him at lunch – on his own table with four friends, all demolishing large plates of spaghetti bolognese, with chicken nuggets and chips on the side. Boys' nirvana. My wife and I smiled. Job done and we hadn't even had our first holiday cocktail. Later, I stretched out on a double daybed by the Olympic pool and began reading a book, which I would finish that week. A decade-long holiday wish fulfilled.

Any day at a resort such as this follows a predictable path. My wife did yoga every morning, while I got stuck into water skiing (mono, I'll have you know) and tennis camp with coach Rafa, aka Jimmy from London. Already something of a resort legend, Rafa also takes football, beach tennis, as well as quiz night. He even took a large crowd of us – yes, we made friends – over the wire for two fabulous nights out in the local harbour town, Foça.

One day, I headed to the spa for a super frothy hammam massage, then I let Doctor Fish dine on my ankles. Weird. Meal times for the guests are at the obscenely big and delicious buffet. The breakfast egg chef is unbeatable and jolly Turkish cooks serve up fresh twists at lunch and dinner. In between meals, everyone disperses around the resort, so there is never any sense of feeling crowded.

The waterfront staff are affable and supremely patient instructors. We all had a go at sailing (I capsized my Pico six times) and kayaking and Joseph stood up on his first water skiing run. Most of the time he was off with his new mates doing whatever the reps had organised. Our afternoons revolved around long hours kicking back by the pool, before more sport.

The beauty of a Mark Warner resort is that there are no important decisions to discuss, like road maps and days out. But two questions linger: is this travelling and did we get to know Turkey? Well, not really, and of course not. But we relaxed, had fun and met some lovely people. It was exactly the holiday we needed this year.

During his penultimate breakfast – chicken nuggets, chips and shocking-pink, "wow-this-is-amazing" salami – Joseph looked around pensively, then said: "I love Mark Warner."

"Oh really, why?" I asked, fishing for a good quote. He thought for a beat, then added simply: "Because it makes me feel free."

Gosh, he nailed the resort option paradox in one. Being trapped actually sets you free. And, guess what, I think my wife agreed. I certainly did.

Rob and his family stayed at Mark Warner's Phokaia Beach Resort, Turkey. Two adults and one child, for seven nights half-board, with flights and transfers, costs £4,177. [markwarner.co.uk](http://markwarner.co.uk).



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