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# It can get too child-friendly ...

Look beyond the kitsch and you will find Kinderhotels keep kids of all ages happy, says Jane Knight

THE LARGE, bright fibreglass duck standing at the entrance to our hotel made me cringe. It was a mere taster of what lay within the lobby — a kitsch fantasyland of teddies hitching rides in balloon baskets, pink and yellow dragonflies clustering around a tree and that duck again — another fibreglass image as part of a bench, with a smaller model pedalling frantically across a tightrope above us.

Oh God, I thought, before noticing that two-year-old Christian, clutching the cuddly duck he had been given on arrival, was entranced. He couldn't get enough of Gina the duck, in whose eponymous hotel in Carinthia we were staying. She was everywhere, diving into the pool, bearing the rubbish bins, holding aloft the wine menu on each restaurant table, glass in hand (not very PC, surely?)

Had I checked into an upmarket Butlins? Not a bit of it. Once I'd come to terms with sharing my holiday with the web-footed one, I started appreciating what this Kinderhotel had to offer. If you haven't heard of the 45-strong Austrian marketing consortium of hotels for families, it's time to wise up: the concept is little short of genius. All are different — some have mini-grand prix courses or pirate themes, while others have ducks — but all have the same basic formula.

Think of everything you need to make a family-friendly holiday and then add some more. Our apartment (with two bedrooms) included a potty, nappy-changing table with wipes, steps allowing the height-challenged to reach the sink, a micro-

wave and a baby-listening system.

Downstairs, younger children cavorted in the soft play area while older ones played in the free internet room or on the PlayStations. Adults lazed on sun loungers, taking in the views of the waters of Faaker See and the mountains beyond, as their offspring splashed between indoor and outdoor pools, then helped themselves to the soda fountain and a freezer full of ice-cream.

It was free, as is everything you consume, except alcoholic drinks (so a good-value way to holiday in the expensive eurozone). The food, served at early meal times, is much better than the bland buffet fare that so many family hotels dish up, though sometimes repetitive (surely not pasta twice a day for the children?)

Childcare is also included in the price, but lest you start thinking Gina's must be paradise on earth, let me tell you about the Draper family

from Germany who sat at the restaurant table next to us. At least, they sat there for part of the week until four-year-old Tim was temporarily mislaid while in childcare and his parents checked out in disgust. Alarming, nobody had realised that he had

## 'THERE ARE NO HEALTH AND SAFETY BODS JUMPING UP AND DOWN'

drifted off alone until his worried mother found him by the PlayStation.

"Something went wrong," said the manager, Christian Stroitz. "It's diffi-

cult for the staff to know when they have so many children."

I had already decided that a handful of staff in charge of up to 60 children with frequent sorties outside didn't compare favourably with our Ofsted-registered creches, with one

staff member for every three to four children under three. Strangely, the crèche was a parent-free zone, so unless Christian wanted to go in alone he couldn't play with the toys.

Some people liked the childcare, though. "If you are looking for English-style childcare that is 110 per cent safe, this is not necessarily the best option," said Kistin May, a German who lives in Oxfordshire with her English husband Andy and children, aged 6 and 8. "But for our children, it is perfect as they are old enough to be independent and there are no health and safety bods jumping up and down."

There certainly weren't when we all traipsed off to Gina's pond, fishing rods in hand, to catch our supper one day. Toddlers and teenagers alike swung fishing hooks through the air, which amazingly ended up only in the fish. It was fun, carefree, and just a little bit irresponsible — like life used to be before we grew up and became so security conscious.

Austria clearly has a different idea of what constitutes child safety, as we found when we ambled down to Faaker See to go rowing. The boat-hire woman looked at me as if I were mad when I asked for a lifejacket. So instead we spent an afternoon dropping stones off the jetty into the clear

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lake waters at the beach; unfortunately, only a tiny stretch of the shore is open to the public.

It was the only place accessible without a car from Gina's, which made me a little claustrophobic, with a need to explore what is undoubtedly a beautiful region. Back at the hotel, the plentiful activities were just a tad too child centred — everything from tractor rides to treasure hunts and tie-dyeing. Then there was Gina, who appeared in costume to dance with the children every morning in the lobby, the highlight of Christian's day. When you can't beat them, join them, I thought, as we held hands to dance with the feathered one. But it didn't stop me savouring every mouthful of the duck that was served in the restaurant one evening.

### Need to know

Gina's Kinderhotel (0845 0822422, [www.kinderhotels.com](http://www.kinderhotels.com)) has a week's all-inclusive holiday from £1,362-£1,825 for two adults and a child in a two-bedroom apartment. Also in Carinthia is Europe's 1st Baby and Child Hotel, where the rooms are smaller but smarter than Gina's, although the food isn't as good. Facilities are better (large soft play area, bouncy castle and waterslide). Stay before April all inclusive from £1,251 for two adults and a child. Flights are extra; Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)) flies to Klagenfurt, near both hotels. Transfers are included.

**More information** Austrian National Tourist Office  
[www.austriatourism.com/uk](http://www.austriatourism.com/uk)

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