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The Cipriani's child-friendly staff, and, below, Freddie's mask

Harriet Perry



THE KIDS' MENU, CIPRIANI-STYLE

Posh hotels are trying to be more child-friendly. Even the Cipriani says it loves kids. Matt Rudd takes his toddlers to see if it's true

Sophia Loren, Ronald Reagan, Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Diana, Jack Nicholson, Costner, Scorsese, Hoffman, Eastwood... they've all stayed at the Cipriani in Venice. Anyone who is anyone has stayed at the Cipriani. And now, so have I. But there's a difference between me and anyone who's anyone. Not the money. Not the fame. No, not the good looks. A different difference. I brought my children. Yes, that's right. The Cipriani, a hotel that hangs its world-beating cachet on its terrifying exclusivity, has decided in the past few months to embrace families. They've launched a children's club, probably the poshest children's club in the world. Why would they do that?

The official reason is that things were all getting a bit too starched-collar and blue-blazer. The It crowd who'd been here in the Swinging Sixties were still coming despite having reached their Saggy Seventies. Youth is to be encouraged. The unofficial reason might be more to do with cash. In these hard times, top-end hotels are having to diversify. They're having to let all sorts of riffraff in. Even children. Whatever the reason, I'm here with the kids. And I'm terrified. You see, I've gone to posh, family-friendly hotels before and most of them have been more grit-your-teeth-and-pretend-we're-family-friendly. You can feel the concierge itching to slap the toddler swinging on the silk curtains. Other guests suffer, but not half as much as the stressed-out parents. You spend the whole time only just catching priceless vases.

This time, we got off to an excellent start. Arriving by private motor launch straight from the airport (that'll be €100,

signore — €60 for the transfer, €40 because I look *bellissimo* in my chinos, no?), we were met by Roberto at the jetty. Roberto has been head doorman of the Cipriani for 19 years and could be expected to resist this newfangled child-friendly idea, but he's going with the revolution. Freddie is swept off in a wave of Italian exclamation marks and smart tailoring to the pond by the lobby. Later, puffed with pride, he announces that Roberto has given him a Very Important Job. He must feed the carp at 10am each morning. Preferably with croissants stolen from the breakfast buffet. Freddie loves this and therefore we love Roberto.

Our room is full of expensive vases, but this is okay: Felix has spotted something altogether more exciting. There is a platter of handmade jellies and a champagne-shaped bottle of children's fruit juice. In a champagne bucket. Nice

touch. Obviously, I confiscate the jellies. I know what happens if children eat sugar in expensive hotels. And they're too delicious to waste on a two-year-old.

Later, we stay at the pool as long as we dare. It is surrounded by sophisticated, sunbaked Euro couples. This is the first time in 20 years I've seen people applying baby oil instead of sun block. There is also, separately, Gary Barlow and an 80-year-old woman with unnervingly smooth implants. But there are no children. The staff are wonderful, relaxed even, with the family... the Cipriani is one of those hotels that is so posh, it doesn't feel the need to behave posh. But I'm pretty sure not all the guests have subscribed to the new family-friendliness. So we make an early beeline back to the safety of our room and the room-service menu.

The next day is the big day. We plan to eat at the restaurant without our kids. Freddie will be in the Smile Club making Venetian masks with Linda, the glamorous American who runs it. Felix, who is too young to abandon, will fall asleep at 1.30pm, so help me. That should give us a good hour to pretend we're young and childless again.

I tell the hotel of our plan and they reserve a table for whenever Felix falls asleep. How flexible. Unfortunately,

they also fall for his toothy smile at breakfast and give him handmade chocolate lollipops (x 2). He's still doing his impression of the Duracell Bunny at half-two. Freddie, on the other hand, is having a ball. His mask is taking shape nicely and he's already alarmingly accustomed to the idea that five-star hotels are fun places where you can go swimming whenever you like, play Wii whenever you like and order all sorts of flashy food... whenever you like. He's happy to stay at the club all day. So it's only Felix spoiling our fun until... he's gone. Quick. Order the starters.

Carpaccio con salsa classica Cipriani, taglierini verdi gratinati, salt-baked monkfish... a cooling breeze, a bottle of something eye-wateringly expensive. Maybe even a spot of hand-holding after the *secondo piatto*. Ahh, life before kids.

"Let's have dessert," she says.

"Okay," I say.

"Daddy. Mummy. Wee-wee," says Felix, wide-eyed in his buggy.

"Let's have dessert later," we sigh.

No problem, says the waiter. We'll have something sent up early evening.

So, it's early evening and Harriet is off swimming with Freddie. I'm bathing Felix. He throws a vase-worth of water over me, so I take off my clothes, except my sunhat, which I've forgotten about. The doorbell goes. I jog over, eager not to let a child drown in a posh hotel bath. Because I'm naked, I check who it is through the spyhole. It's Harriet.

I open the door and she's flustered: "I've been trying to get in for ages."

"Why didn't you ring the bell?"

"I did."

"I was in the bathroom."

"I've had to get someone to let me in."

Which is when I notice the room-service guy standing behind her looking like he's stumbled on something inappropriate. I run off into the bathroom with a yelp as he brings in our tray of extravagant desserts. Someone has written a note to accompany them. It reads: "Hotel Cipriani — Venice. Romanticism still exists".

Travel details: Matt Rudd travelled as a guest of Seasons in Style (01244 202000, seasonsinstyle.com) and EasyJet (easyjet.com). Seasons in Style has two nights at the Cipriani (hotelcipriani.com) from £3,125 for two adults and one child in a junior suite. Or until November 7, you can get four nights for the price of three, from £4,185 (or £5,490 for a family of four in two rooms). The prices include breakfast, flights and transfers. The Smile Club is complimentary for 4- to 12-year-olds.

Or try Bellini Travel (020 7602 7602, bellinitravel.com) or Italian Expressions (01752 878075, expressionsholidays.co.uk).

FIVE-STAR FOR LESS

1 Look for prepaid deals. The rack rate at Paris's Méridien Montparnasse is £207, but if you take the fully prepaid option, you get it for £186.

2 Join hotel loyalty programmes. That way, you'll get discounts, room upgrades and first call on the offers.

3 Go compare. We checked the price of a weekend at Barcelona's Hotel Omm and the variation says it all. Hotel rate: £262. Hotels.com: £286. Ebookers.com: £191. Kayak.co.uk: £183.

4 DIY v package. Tour-operator packages are often cheaper than DIY bookings, but that's not always the case. Five nights at the W Hollywood, with flights, is £1,195pp at ba.com. If you book flights and accommodation separately — room £532pp, Virgin Atlantic flight £500pp — the bottom line is £1,032.

5 Walk in late. In many hotels, rooms left unsold after 6pm are sold off at up to 50% off. If you like a gamble, it's worth a try.

"Freddie's already alarmingly accustomed to the five-star lifestyle"

