

CLUB MED GOES UPSCALE, STAYS GLOBAL



ROCHELLE LASH
Checking In

Hands up, baby! Family life and deluxe accommodations have overtaken the bacchanalian singles scene at Club Med, according to the company's chief executive.

Henri Giscard d'Estaing is chairman and CEO of Club Méditerranée. If his name is familiar, it may be because he is the son of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who was president of France from 1974 to 1981.

Henri Giscard d'Estaing oversees 66 Club Med resorts and one cruise ship, which operate in 26 countries and accommodate about 1.3 million visitors each year. And he is credited with pulling the global travel corporation out of a post-9/11 slump with new ventures.

Giscard d'Estaing has shifted Club Med's focus sharply upscale, installing exclusive spas; replacing big dining-room buffets with cook-to-order food stations; and adding swish accommodations with televisions, private pools and more sophisticated lounges. Club Med is still relaxed and informal, but it has added deluxe options and more comforts.

"We are becoming upscale without gold or marble," Giscard d'Estaing said in an interview last week at a downtown Montreal hotel. "We use innovative young designers and our clubs reflect a holiday spirit, each inspired by local culture."

In 2015, Club Med teamed up with another global giant, Cirque du Soleil, to offer guests advanced acrobatics at Punta Cana, a favourite destination of Montrealers.

There was talk of a ski Club Med at Le Massif in Charlevoix, but that is not going ahead, although the company is still researching sites for a ski destination.

Giscard d'Estaing also is ensuring that each club reflects Club Med's global presence.

"It is very important that each club is a truly multicultural experience," said the CEO. "Each of our staff teams represents between 15 and 25 nationalities. It is beautiful to see these young people working together."

The concept has evolved dra-



The new Zen Oasis section at Club Punta Cana has posh bungalows, plus a private pool, bar and beach. CLUB MÉDITERRANÉE

IF YOU GO

Club Med: 888-932-2582, clubmed.com.

Starting prices for seven nights including all meals, wine, airport transfers:

\$1,089 p.p., double occupancy (plus flights) at Punta Cana; \$1,099 p.p., double occupancy (plus flights) at Cancún; \$1,999 p.p., double occupancy (including flights) at Columbus Isle.

matically. Although 20th-century resort life included folksy hotels with movie nights and meals, Club Med changed the game. The first clubs opened in the 1950s, and in the early days it was the first resort concept to attract adventurous young vacationers to wild island picnics, nude beaches and all-night dances, in addition to all-inclusive sports, copious meals with wine and nightly entertainment.

There were no locks on the guest-room doors and no limits on tropical sun and hedonistic fun. It wasn't your grandmother's getaway.

"The success of Club Med is that we are in tune with the

times," said Giscard d'Estaing. "The sexual revolution of the 1970s was a major phenomenon, and freedom is one of our core values. Today, we are very focused on families — and ensuring they also have unbridled fun."

Club Méditerranée opened its first Mini-Club in 1967 and gradually changed its market base. Today, the mix is 70 per cent families, 20 per cent couples and 10 per cent singles. "We offer much more than 'full board,'" said Giscard d'Estaing. "We often have three generations of the same family and we have crafted different experiences for each — an active lifestyle of sports, relaxed spa and pool sojourns, plus Mini-Clubs with trained childcare staff."

Nearly 40,000 Canadians vacation at Club Meds annually, mostly in the Caribbean, Mexico and Florida. More than 60 per cent of those travellers are from Quebec.

Three North American Club Meds have made major changes recently.

Club Med Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. A \$40-million overhaul has put this family club in the spotlight for 2016 with:

- The addition of a Zen Oasis adults-only area of bungalows, with 78 accommodations; a private beach, swimming pool and bar; plus extras like bathrobes and turndown service.

- A luxurious Club Med Spa by L'Occitane, a brand from France.

- Renovations to the Tiara Luxury Space, a signature "five-trident" boutique hotel within the resort, with 32 suites and concierge service.

- Club Med's first CREATIFIVE by Cirque du Soleil, where guests can try advanced acrobatics such as high bungee, flying trapeze, aerial silk, tightrope and trampoline.

- An expanded Mini-Club featuring an art studio, a water park, a baby gym, a music academy with theatrical performances and gaming.

- New golf partnerships, in addition to swimming pools, windsurfing, kitesurfing, sailing, archery and tennis.

- **Club Med Cancún Yucatán, Mexico.** This sun-baked family resort, near ancient Mayan ruins and precious coral reefs, is wildly popular for its three beaches and virtually guaranteed good weather.

The club has a wide scope of

activities: snorkelling, windsurfing, water skiing, wakeboarding, kayaking, trapeze and tennis, as well as off-site golf, diving with sharks and mountain-biking through the jungle.

Cancún has added extensive eco-operating systems and major updates, including:

- A posh five-trident rooms section with Mexican hacienda décor, a private pool, concierge service and chilled Champagne.

- A Club Med Spa by Comfort Zone, with special treatments tailored to children 11 and over.

- For youngsters, the Aquamarina family building, Petit Club Med and a kids-only pool.

- **Club Med Columbus Isle, Bahamas.** The secluded Caribbean resort is romantic and restorative. It's open to children two and over, although it does not have a Mini-Club.

Surrounded by gorgeous waters, Columbus Isle is strong on scuba, in addition to windsurfing, paddle-boarding and sailing. It recently launched a multimillion-dollar upgrade that so far has included:

- The addition of a Club Med Spa by L'Occitane.

- Updating the restaurant and pool.

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