

Austria's Babyhotel: crayons, kangaroos and contented kids

Turn a blind eye to the decor and Austria's Babyhotel, with its free childcare and all the gear and play areas you could imagine, is heaven for kids and parents



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Plastic fantastic ... the Baby hotel in Carinthia, Austria.

I am checking in to a hotel whose mascot is a giant orange kangaroo. Hideous perma-tanned marsupials and grinning gnomes greet us at the door, while a red waterslide snakes its way down the side of the building like an external intestine. I cringe at the tastelessness of it all, then look over at my 18-month-old daughter, and my inner hotel snob is silenced. Lily is entranced – a slow grin explodes into wide-eyed delight at the sight of the plastic kangaroo on a bench in the driveway.

How did it come to this? For me, hotels used to be sexy and enchanting places; now they are purely functional. Still, I figure, happy child equals happy parent, and I'm travelling without Dad so need all the help I can get. In his place I have brought along a friend, Klara, her husband Matt, and their two boys, four-month-old Theo and three-year-old Max, to test the Babyhotel in Carinthia, southern Austria.

Part of the child-centred Kinderhotel group, it offers up to 80 hours a week of free childcare and activities, theoretically freeing up parents to ski in the nearby resorts of Innerkrems and Katschberg (30 minutes away by free shuttle bus), explore the mountains on foot in the summer, or use the on-site gym and spa facilities. Trouble is, I'm only here for a long weekend and my daughter is mildly stranger-phobic. It will be a good test of the creche, and a miracle if I reach the slopes.



Bowled over ... the Babyhotel was a hit with 18-month-old Lily

A few minutes in and I concede that the purpose-built set-up is very relaxing. There's no need to contain your toddler in an unsuitable space – a glass-doored playroom off the dining room allows for regular playbreaks and provides an endless stream of playmates

for Max and Lily, who are flushed with the excitement of it all. The hotel's sauna-like heating policy may also contribute to the red faces.

Getting through mealtimes without a major scene can be a major hurdle in many hotels. But here, no one minds that Lily is barging round with a doll's buggy and rearranging the furniture. The inevitable upturned bowl of food is greeted calmly by a waiter speeding over with mop and cloth. The kids' food goes down well, with plenty of fresh options and a range of Hipp Organic jars as a backup if they won't eat their greens (or pasta or chips).

The adult food, though not bad for all-inclusive fare, doesn't quite hit the spot, and the 8pm cut-off for dinner caught me out on the first night. They are missing a trick not providing a later dinner and an adults' lounge for kid-free evenings. There is a late-night bar but it's not in the main building. Another culture clash is the parents' smoking room, right off the main lobby.

The rooms and apartments vary in size but are well thought out, with adjoining kids' sleeping areas with bunk beds or proper cots. Best of all, the internal doors mean parents can read, chat or watch TV in the main part of the room after bedtime (no shoving baby in the bathroom or resorting to headtorches!) The hotel also offers a hi-tech baby listening system via a mobile phone (you choose how many cries activate the alarm).



Kid's stuff ... Lily takes a ride

The availability of cots and linen, sterilisers, fridges, changing mats, formula, baby food and potties helps parents to travel light(er), and you can even rent a pram and pre-order nappies from the shop. At no extra charge (if you're staying a week) the hotel will pick you up at the airport or train station in a minibus with child seats.

But it is the facilities and the high-quality childcare that steal the show. Kids' entertainment options abound, from the cinema and swimming pools in the basement to the onsite petting zoo and ski school for two to five-year-olds. A favourite with the under-twos is a baby pool and slide, stocked with armbands and toys. Ready-packed swimming bags with towels in each room make pool trips hassle-free.

At the end of day one, Max is unequivocal: "Can we stay here forever?" A particular favourite of his is a three-storey Pirate Land play den. For Lily and Theo there is a "crawling room", a term that vastly undersells a fantastic infant crèche, complete with mini ball pit, hammock cribs swinging from the ceiling and sweet, gentle staff (their English is not always brilliant but they do their best).

Day two brings the chance to head off to the slopes. As I drop Lily off, armed with favourite toys, sleeping bag, and 101 tips for the creche staff, I wonder if Klara and I are mad to attempt a full morning of mums-only skiing a half-hour bus ride away at Innerkrems. Lily shoots me a "how could you" look and I add a third emergency number to the list.

I needn't have worried: Matt checks in on her and baby Theo every 40 minutes during the four hours we are gone and texts to report that both are happy and eating well. I get back to find a "do not disturb" sign on the door. Inside, the carer (or should I say baby whisperer?) is twiddling her thumbs as all her charges sleep.

Overall, Babyhotel won me over. Yes, it was horribly naff and a little far from the slopes and the nearest village, but anywhere that can distract Lily from her separation anxiety and leave her wanting more the next day gets my vote. All the parents I spoke to agreed that their children weren't just happy to be left in the kids' club but asking to go. Peace of mind paired with a decent amount of downtime – hang on, it's beginning to sound like a holiday.

• A week for two adults and one child (14 or under) in a Josef family suite costs €1,405, full board with up to 80 hours' childcare. An additional child under eight costs from €200 a week. Kinderhotels all over Austria can be booked at 0845 0822 422, kinderhotels.co.uk. Book the Babyhotel direct at +43 4732 2350, babyhotel.eu. Ryanair flies from Stansted to Salzburg from £34 and Klagenfurt from £12, then it's 75 minutes by car or hotel bus. Ski hire in Innerkrems costs €19 a day and a one-day ski pass costs €3.