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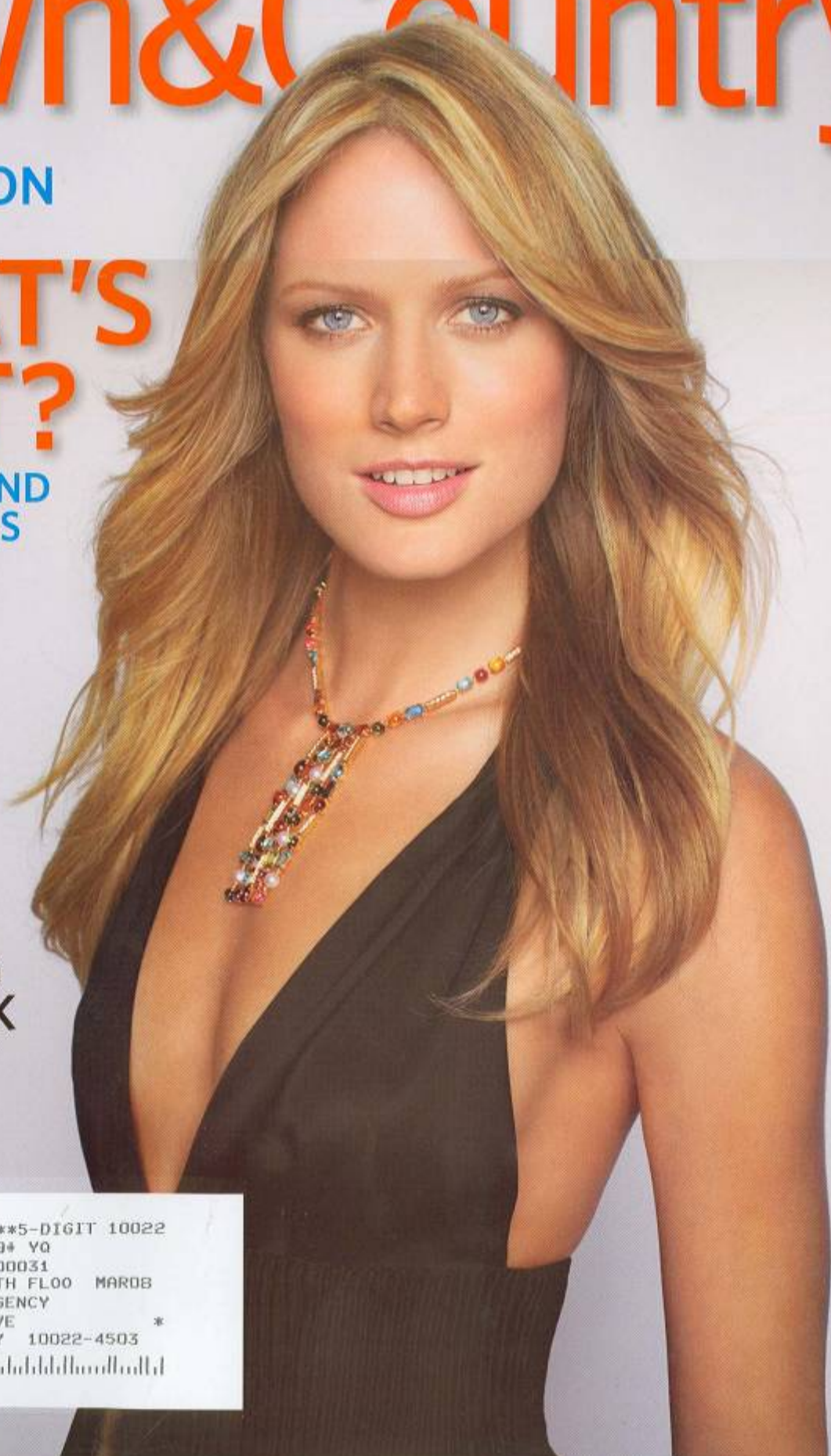
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ATLANTIS RISING

THE COVE gives families another reason to visit the Bahamas' most-talked-about theme park.

BY HEIDI MITCHELL



Paradise Beach, on the west side of the Cove Atlantis, remains virtually empty despite nearly 10,000 guests at the Atlantis complex. Opposite: Quiet time beside one of the twenty cabanas at the outdoor lounge, Cain at the Cove.

AUGUST 2007

“Are we going to swim with sharks?”

It was a reasonable question coming from my four-year-old, Gideon, whom I had forced to view countless screen shots of predator tanks and waterslides in the hopes of getting him and his two-year-old brother, Malachi, excited about a weeklong trip to a place revered as kiddie heaven, Atlantis, on Paradise Island.

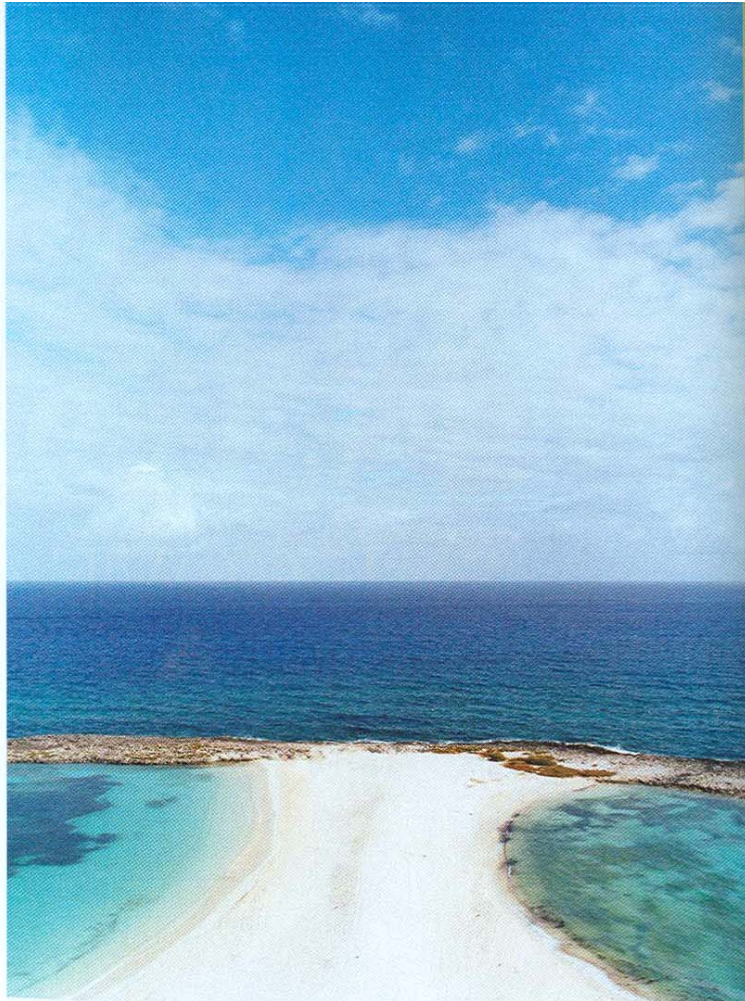
What was surprising was the jabs from friends and family when I told them where the Mitchell clan would be spending spring break. “You’re going to a theme park?” “Are you planning to slide down the Leap of Faith?”—the sixty-foot water ride that shoots brave souls down a nearly vertical black tube, then through a pool of sharks. “You’re going to the Bahamas to see an aquarium?” “Isn’t that a mythical island?” (Yes, Dad.)

Atlantis may be all of those things—a theme park, a mind-boggling aquarium, a land of waterslides inspired by Poseidon’s kingdom fathoms below—but a trip there is also a rite of passage for any parent or grandparent of a child under sixteen. Like Universal Studios or Disney World, Atlantis is a fantasyland that, at some point, your child or grandchild will beg to see, wondering what kind of deprived life he or she has led until now. Getting adults charged up about taking a week off work to ride an inner tube and wait in line for yet another lunch of chicken fingers, however, has always been a more difficult task.

Dreamed up by Sol Kerzner and his late son, Butch, the 171-acre Atlantis was intended to appeal to a broad swath of American holidaymakers. To that end, the duo planned to open the resort in three phases. Phase one, in 1994, involved taking over what had been Donald Trump’s and then Merv Griffin’s Paradise Island Resort & Casino and turning it into a water world of pools, rides and casinos. Phase two, in 1998, upped the ante with the construction of a slightly more luxurious hotel on the property, which brought the total number of guest rooms to 2,317; rooms range from those with tacky tropical-explosion interiors to the over-the-top Bridge Suite, which connects the two Royal Towers and is favored by Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan. Phase three, completed at the end of March, was the most ambitious: it aimed to make the Aquaventure water park the ultimate adrenaline inducer and to bring in the affluent traveler who would prefer to make this particular rite of passage in style.

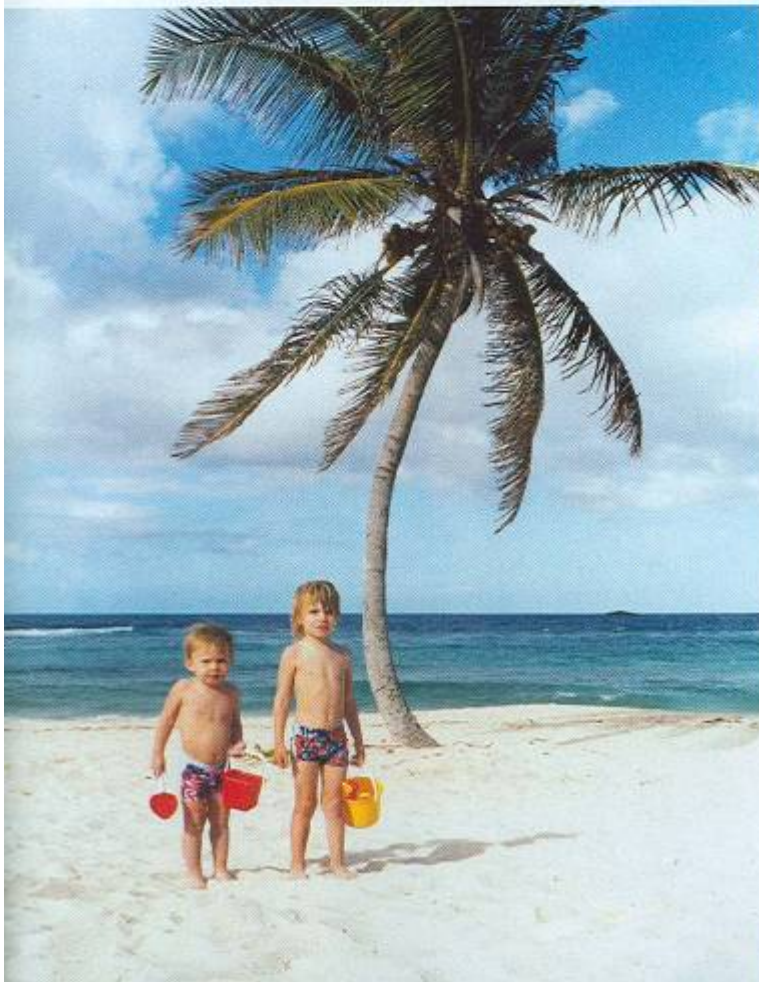
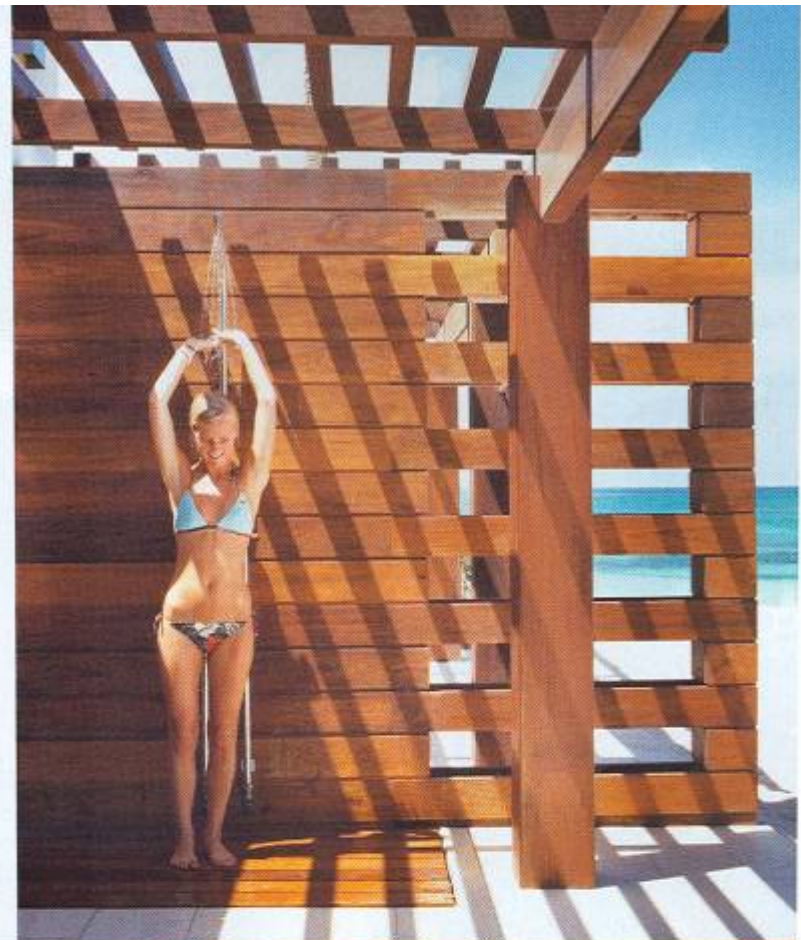
Which is where the Cove Atlantis comes in. Set between two spectacular Atlantic beaches, the twenty-one-story tower is painted the same shade of coral pink as the rest of the resort’s hotels, but that is where the comparisons end. As

The Cove’s twin beaches (above) lead to the crystal-clear Atlantic. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Two Cove coordinators await guests; a refreshing moment; the interior of a cabana, designed by Jeffrey Beers; the author’s children at play.



we pull up to the porte cochere in our stretch limo (a perk for all guests), bags are taken and smiles are given, along with generous helpings of “Welcome, Mrs. Mitchell.” The general manager, John Conway, greets me and my two travel-weary sons in what passes for business attire: white linen pants and a flowing shirt. “This is your money shot,” he says, pointing through the open-air lobby, with its teak cathedral ceilings, cube-shaped water fountains and marble floors, to the turquoise, green and aquamarine ocean beyond. The warm breeze blows through the palm trees and across the lily ponds and through my sons’ hair to remind me that we’re no longer in New York’s Arctic-like spring.

We’re guided to a VIP check-in, then past Mesa Grill, where Bobby Flay is preparing pork medallions and Bahamian-spiced chicken skewers. Another turn reveals displays of red-coral candelabras and intricately embroidered beach caftans at Escape by Vivre, the first outpost of cult-catalogue founder Eva Jeanbart-Lorenzotti. Up in our room, one of 600 at the Cove, two backpacks filled with pails and shovels are waiting for Gideon and Malachi. A fruit basket—kiwifruit, peaches, nectarines and star fruit—and cookies and milk have been set out to refresh us after our three-hour flight. In 650 square feet, there are somehow two giant flat-screen televisions, a crib, a pull-out sofa, a glass table with a bottom shelf made of mother-of-pearl and a sumptuous bathroom that competes with the water park below our balcony.





Barbecued duck in blue-corn tortillas, one of Bobby Flay's specialties at Mesa Grill. Opposite: Eva Jeanbart-Lorenzotti inside her first shop, Escape by Vivre.



Yet the space is uncrowded and even tame, awash in tropical hues of orange and green. But all these temptations—the plush room, the restaurant, the shop, even the Red Flower custom-scented bathroom amenities—mean nothing to a four-year-old. Gideon is unimpressed. He wants to see the sharks.

Atlantis claims 50,000 fish in some twenty million gallons of water, which makes it the world's largest aquarium. On the other side of the resort, past the Mayan Temple and the Power Tower (where the newest, craziest waterslides are found), we unearth the Dig, a cavernous viewing warren that's supposed to represent what the explorers discovered when the sunken city of Atlantis began its ascent from the sea. Through one glass wall we catch a school of lionfish swimming among the ruins of the mythical city. A twenty-foot-wide manta ray floats by, and Gideon can't believe his luck. We get the creepy-crawlies in the lobster room, where thousands of crustaceans climb on top of one another, beside us and overhead (safely behind glass, of course). When a sawfish bares his jagged teeth with an eye to swallowing up Malachi, the poor child



Left: Bobby Flay in his Mesa Grill. Above: Flay's spice-rubbed pork medallions. Opposite: The open-air lobby with teak cathedral ceilings, LED-lit water features and dramatic chandeliers.

squeals and shakes with fear. "See no sharks!" he screams, speaking his first sentence ever. The tour group hot on our tail, with a megaphone-wielding guide as an escort, laughs at his terror.

It's spring break, and with every one of the rooms on the property occupied (not to mention the day-trippers who come for the casino, the mall and the Marina Village of shops and restaurants), people are everywhere. Everywhere, that is, but at the Cove. As soon as we walk back through the breezeway en route to the Cascades Pool, the Cove's zero-entry family pool, the volume is turned down. Moms in stylish beachwear take their well-behaved children to lunch at Mosaic, the 300-seat, three-meal-a-day restaurant that offers easily the best buffet I've ever had: roast leg of lamb, coconut tapioca pudding and all. Over coffee at Sea Glass, the nearby breakfast room and bar, Harry Slatkin, president of the Home Design division of Limited Brands, can't contain his enthusiasm for this place. "My eight-year-old daughter refuses to go to the One & Only Ocean Club anymore," he jokes about the Kerzner International-owned boutique resort at the east end of the >129



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beach—once the only luxury option in the area. “There’s nothing for her to do.” Here, he says, she has easy access to the water park, and adults have plenty to keep themselves entertained. Slatkin’s wife, Laura, has perhaps too easy access to Escape by Vivre. “She spent \$7,000 yesterday,” he says, laughing. Her inventory: bamboo vases, embroidered napkins and place mats with a palm-frond motif, a hot-pink passport holder and luggage tag (for her daughter), and a few dresses. “What do you do when you need a break?” asks Slatkin, somewhat rhetorically. “You go to Vivre.”

Jeanbart-Lorenzotti has seen more than a few Laura Slatkins step into her shop, even though it’s been open for only a few days. “Yesterday a woman bought out all of my coral candelabras and the two huge embossed orange-leather trunks,” she tells me over dinner at Nobu, while in the background we hear the bells of the Atlantis casino, just beyond the green-neon-lit entrance. “She’s having her butler pick

them all up and take the candelabras to her yacht and the trunks to her private jet,” the boutique owner reveals. “Another woman literally bought the ring off my finger. We’re going to run out of inventory!” Jeanbart-Lorenzotti can’t believe that her new office is somehow in the Bahamas, though the unexpected, she says, is what Vivre stands for. Plus, the Cove is a great place for her jet-setting friends to hop over to for a visit (a New York couple from her circle are set to dock their 150-foot yacht there the next day). A crate will arrive from Paris at any moment, but in the meantime, Jeanbart-Lorenzotti’s scarves, jewelry and housewares are flying off the shelves. Indeed, once my husband, Colin, arrives after lunch on day three, I take him to see a forty-eight-inch necklace of mother-of-pearl cubes, only to find that it was sold two hours earlier. I make do with a fitted eyelet blouse with a Mao collar and cap sleeves. Unfortunately, that much-anticipated crate doesn’t

arrive until after I leave the island, but I’m sure there were a few women who extended their stay, hoping to snatch up one more strand of polished coral.

Like anyone else who tunes in to the Food Network, Jeanbart-Lorenzotti’s ten-year-old daughter has a soft spot for Bobby Flay, thanks to his show *Boy Meets Grill*. This week she can often be found with the chef, prepping crisp squid-and-conch salad in the kitchen of his Mesa Grill. Some spring break. There are thirty-eight restaurants at Atlantis, but this is the one everyone’s talking about, even those who don’t get to learn how to cook a rubbed rib eye from Flay himself. We have only one meal at his Cove restaurant, but the barbecued-duck tortillas are one of the most memorable dishes I’ve eaten. And I don’t even like duck.

Because it’s opening week at the Cove, there are, of course, a few kinks to iron out. Suites are occasionally left uncleaned; room service fails to arrive; >131



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a babysitter turns up unannounced and unbooked. But the mostly Bahamian staff members take the concept of service with a smile to the extreme, even when they get it a bit wrong. If nothing else, they are responsive: when a young boy cuts his foot on the bottom of the family pool, staffers immediately shut it down, empty it out and repave the bottom—all in one day. The resort employs a team of “Cove coordinators,” who receive training equivalent to that of assistant managers. The coordinators are tasked with delivering whatever guests need in a snap: a room upgrade; a reservation at Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s Café Martinique, in Marina Village; a last-minute booking at the Dolphin Cay. Kerzner, whose company spent \$1 billion on this project, is undeterred by the little bumps in the road. It’s his team and his staff, he explains, who give him this confidence. “We have put together a great group, and I’ve challenged these talented folks to come up with something different and upscale,” he says during rare downtime on one of his many visits. “Atlantis stands for choices. Even if you’re a party of sixteen guests, there should be something for everyone to do.”

Our party of four has chosen to make a date at Dolphin Cay with two of the sixteen dolphins displaced from Marine Life Oceanarium, in Gulfport, Mississippi, by Hurricane Katrina. Swimming with a bottlenose is something I’ve always wanted to do—so much so that squeezing into a one-size-too-small wet suit doesn’t really bother me. We’re given a brief introduction to the life and style of the average dolphin, then guided to the eleven-acre lagoon where the new transplants live. At first Malachi giggles nervously, but then he screeches as a dolphin moves in closer. Gideon is a little confused but still acquiesces to a kiss from this adorable creature. I give her a hug, after which she does a few tricks (“standing” on her tail, somersaulting in the air) and swims away. Frolicking with these dolphins is the next-best thing to swimming with

sharks, I tell Gideon, only it’s much safer.

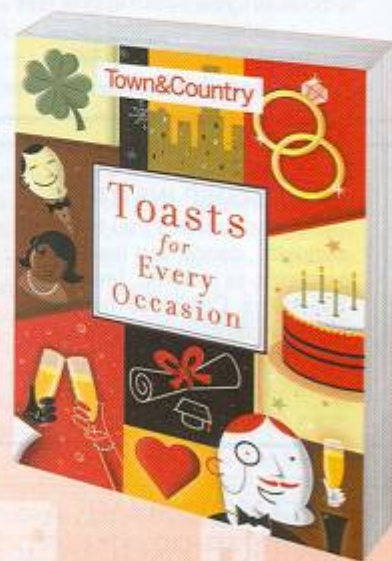
Kerzner said it himself: there should be something for everyone. So before we depart, Colin and I reserve a little private time in a beach cabana at Cain at the Cove. The Atlantis complex may be the ultimate escape for a ten-year-old, but an adult kid can have a pretty remarkable vacation at the Cove (despite the hilarious one-liner a friend told me—that Atlantis was the most fun he could have in his personal version of hell). Far from the hum of the casinos and the blood-curdling screams at the Aquaventure water park, Cain at the Cove is an outdoor lounge with a pool as its centerpiece. There’s a gaming area, a bar, scattered daybeds (some even float in the pool), a fire pit that’s lit at night, music that changes with the time of day. Best of all, kids aren’t allowed. Our cabana, one of twenty, was designed by Jeffrey Beers (Japonais, Daniel Boulud Brasserie in the Wynn Las Vegas) and is fitted with a plasma-screen TV, a mosaic-tiled bathroom, an outdoor shower on the beach—and spa services. A staffer sets up a table on the sand for Colin’s massage, and I snack on a bento box of fresh fruit and sip from a bottle of Veuve Clicquot while my toenails are painted a bronze color called Cove Copper.

With the waves lapping the sloping two-mile white beach—which is nearly empty despite the 10,000 guests here this week—it’s easy to forget that Atlantis was meant for kids. In a few hours the sun will set and the torches in the pool will be lit, and this quiet corner of a raging theme park will feel even farther away from the Surge and the cheeseburgers and the stacks of inner tubes. We have to catch our flight before evening settles on Cain at the Cove and the DJ starts spinning moody lounge music, but even Colin—who notoriously doesn’t “do” anywhere with wristbands—isn’t against coming back. Next time maybe even without the kids. *Standard suites from \$575. The Cove Atlantis, Paradise Island, Bahamas; 877-268-3847; thecoveatlantis.com.* ✘



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