

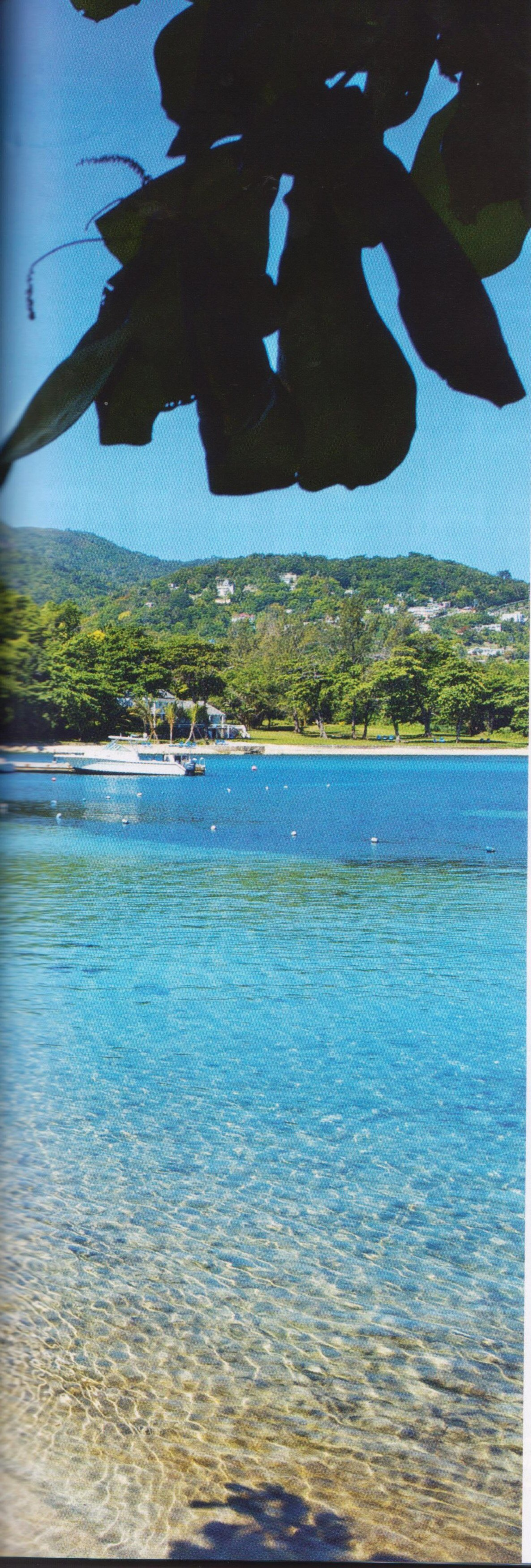


# First time for EVERYTHING



Taking a toddler on a family-friendly cruise ship like Carnival Breeze to the Caribbean is remarkably stress-free, says **Cathy Winston**

**Above:** Cathy on holiday with her daughter Sylvie  
**Right:** Jamaica's glorious beaches are perfect for families



**I**t's the quintessential tropical scene – the sun shining down on a palm-fringed stretch of sand as clear turquoise water laps against the beach. What's a little unexpected is the 16-month-old child shrieking with glee as she toddles into the waves.

As first dips in the sea go, it's hard to beat the Caribbean. I had to make do with the north Wales coast when I was a kid but my daughter Sylvie is getting to enjoy the blissfully warm water off the island of Grand Turk.

In the background, music drifts across the packed loungers from Margaritaville restaurant and just offshore looms our cruise ship, the sleekly imposing *Carnival Breeze*.

It's our first port of call on a six-night voyage out of Miami, taking in Jamaica and the Bahamas as well. It's also my first cruise since becoming a mum,

the ship. Instead of shooting down the water slides, we hit the Splash Zone. And although she's still too young for the Thrill Theater, a 5D cinema where special effects make you feel part of the action, there are baby-friendly performances in the Ovation theatre too. A disco sound-tracked puppet show imagining the secret lives of the towel animals which appear in our stateroom every night gets some enthusiastic attempts at toddler dancing and a wild round of applause.

There are three separate kids' clubs, each with their own programme of activities. At Camp Carnival, two to 11-year-olds are split into several age groups across interconnecting rooms watched over by trained staff. Then, still supervised but with a more relaxed programme, young teens have their own area

### **Sylvie toddles into the waves. As first dips in the sea go, it's hard to beat the Caribbean**

and I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion that this is the way to travel with kids.

How else could I visit four destinations in one week without any transport hassles? Or dine out in half a dozen restaurants without needing a babysitter? Or sneak off for an afternoon for some guilt-free, adrenaline-fuelled fun knowing my daughter is in safe hands?

With my husband stuck at work, Sylvie and I were travelling solo. And while it's not the first time we've holidayed without him, before now we've mainly picked self-catering trips to Europe to give us the flexibility to explore if we wanted or plenty of space to relax if not. Our cruise gave us that same flexibility but with all the facilities of a big resort as well. The perfect compromise.

The sheer number of options available for parents on board *Carnival Breeze* puts most resorts to shame. Pre-baby, I'd have been tempted to lounge by one of the two swimming pools, sunbathe in ship-top adults-only area Serenity or hit the spa.

Now, with my daughter, I discover a whole new side to

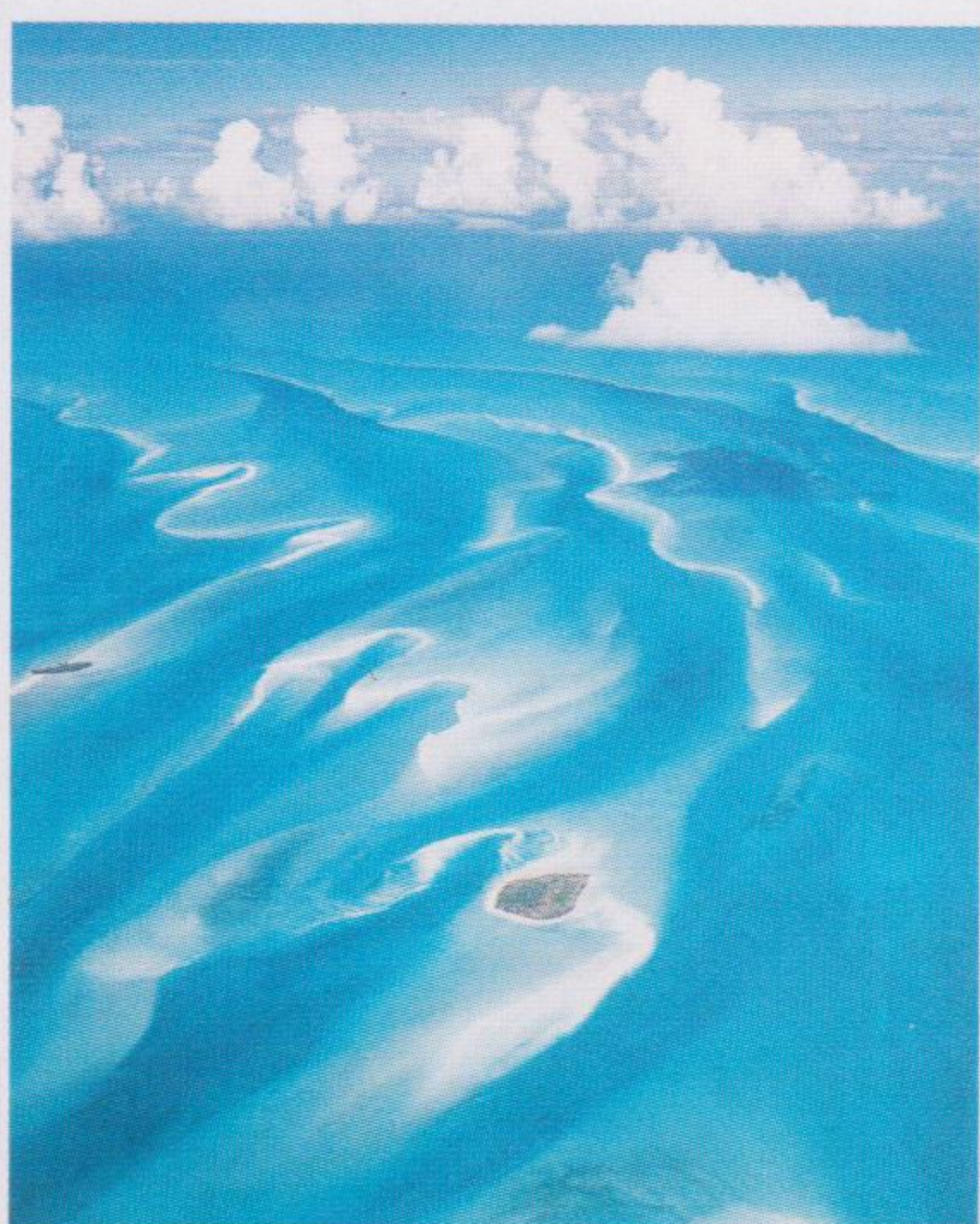
at Circle C. For 15 to 17-year-olds, there's karaoke and video games, as well as teen-only shore excursions in Club O2.

As with most cruise lines, the options for under-tuos are more limited although we squeeze every possible second out of Camp Carnival's two-hour early morning sessions during sea days. Free if I stay to raid the toy box with her, there's also the option to leave her with the crew for under £5 an hour\*, the same rate as the half-day sessions in port for anyone wanting baby-free time on shore.

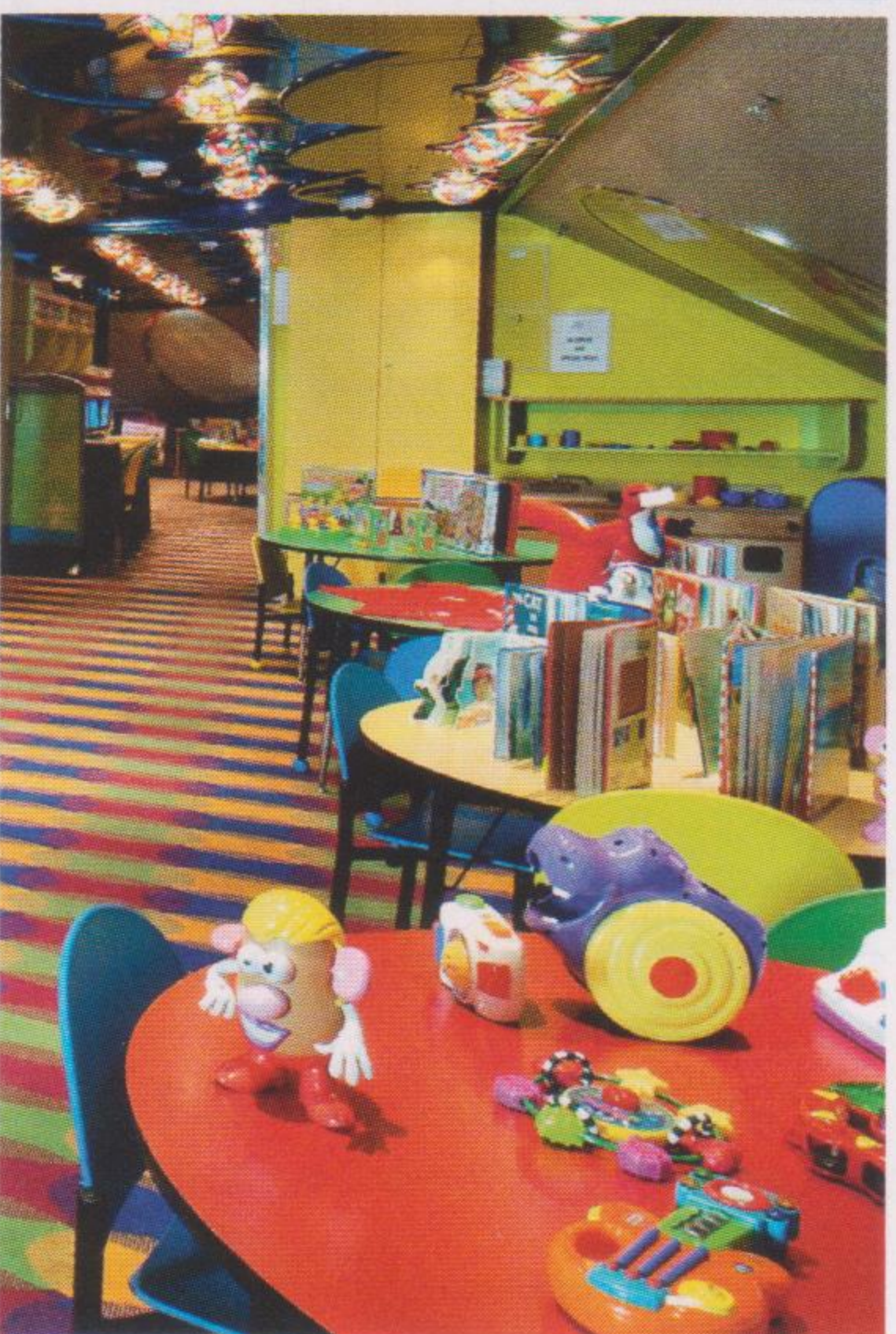
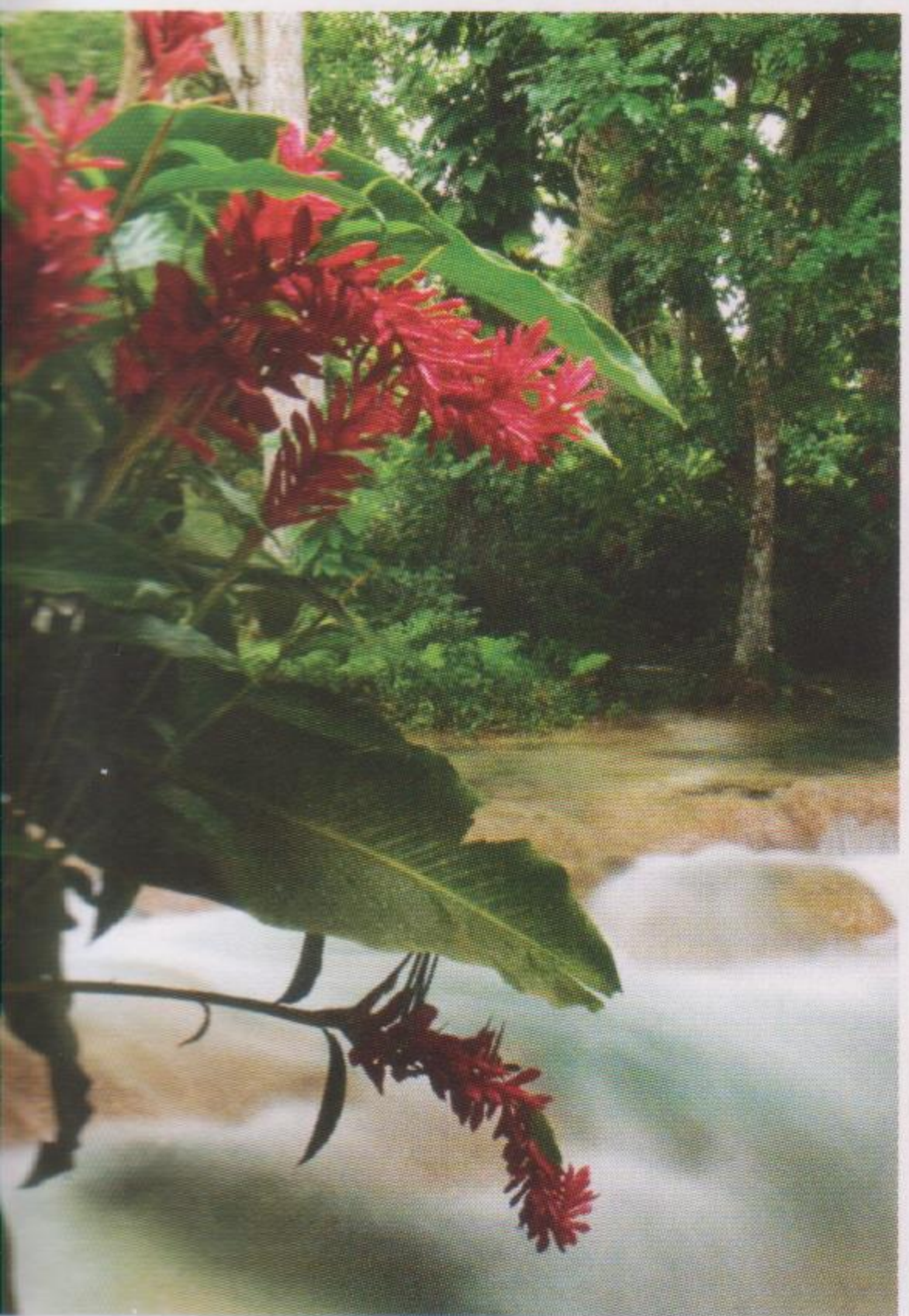
Any nerves I had about leaving Sylvie in a strange place evaporated as soon as I met the Camp Carnival counsellors. They won her over in seconds and set my mind at rest.

While there's currently no in-stateroom babysitting – the only option is Night Owls in Camp Carnival from 10pm to 3am – the restaurants are all so family-friendly that I simply settle Sylvie to sleep in the buggy and take her with me when I go for dinner in the evening.

I soon lose count of the number of crew members who beg for a quick glimpse



**Clockwise, from top left:** Carnival's onboard Splash Zone; the idyllic Bahamas; try something different at Bonsai Sushi restaurant; Camp Carnival runs kids' clubs for two to 11-year-olds including late night babysitting; Dunn's River Falls; Nassau, the Bahamas; visit a zoo in the Caribbean



beneath the muslin as she dozes, tip-toeing around the pushchair while I eat or distracting her with a quick game of peek-a-boo if she's awake.

Best of all is the flexibility. Instead of fixed early or late dining, I soon discover that the "Your Time" option works best, giving me chance to sip strawberry daiquiris and a pear martini created especially for me in the Piano Bar before dinner.

In the end, I only eat in the main Blush and Sapphire restaurants a few times in order to visit the speciality restaurants. Even the impromptu rendition of *That's Amore* by the waiters at Cucina del Capitano, which nearly startles Sylvie awake, is worth risking for the perfectly prepared Italian food there.

The busy buffet in the Lido Marketplace changes daily, with various international dishes on deck nearby – freshly cooked pizza is available 24 hours a day, we build our own burritos at the Blue Iguana Cantina and there's a great range of Indian food at the Tandoor. This is perfect for expanding Sylvie's tastes, because I can pick and choose different food for her every day.

With so much to pack in on board, I jump at the chance to relax on my balcony watching the sea stretching out to the horizon as Sylvie naps inside our stateroom. Even with a cot, a double bed and all of the inevitable baby paraphernalia it doesn't feel cramped, which is very impressive.

The laid-back, welcoming Caribbean is a great place to explore with a baby, too. In Nassau, we head along the seafront towards Ardastra Zoo and Gardens, stopping to buy fresh fruit from a piña colada stand on the way.

But some activities are never going to be baby-friendly – bobsledding and climbing waterfalls among them. So I

seize the opportunity of port day childcare to have an afternoon to myself in Ocho Rios, sending my heart racing as Sylvie gets stuck into Camp Carnival's toys with barely a second glance.

From the SkyExplorer chairlift, gliding gently to 700 feet above sea level, Jamaica's lush green rainforest stretches out beneath me. Then the sound of reggae breaks through the peace of the trees. I hop off at Mystic Mountain Rainforest Adventures Park to get into a custom-designed sled and speed down a 1km track on the side of the mountain. There's a brake on the side if you need it, but otherwise gravity does all the hard work.

Rocketing around the sharp bends, squealing excitedly, only my face-splitting smile reassures the staff at the finish point that I've had a good time.

Having sped down the side of one hill, it was time to climb another – Dunn's River Falls, 600 feet of cascading cold clear water that shoots over the rocks to the sea. Following in the guide's footsteps, our group dodges the deep pools and scrambles hand in hand past natural waterslides to the top.

Still drenched from the spray and grinning from the climb, I race back to the ship feeling slightly guilty at abandoning my daughter for this afternoon of freedom – only to discover she's been having so much fun playing, she hadn't even wanted to stop for her usual nap.

I'm reminded of a little boy on the first day of the cruise. "This is heaven," he said, awe-struck. Out of the mouths of babes. 🍷

**Go online:** Watch Cathy's cruise video on our website at [cruise-international.com/carnival-family-cruise-video-review](http://cruise-international.com/carnival-family-cruise-video-review)

## GETTING THERE

Carnival Cruises offers a six-night western Caribbean cruise on *Carnival Breeze* from £1,379pp full board, including flights and transfers, departing on 20 April 2014. Ports of call include Miami (USA); Grand Turk (Turks and Caicos); Ocho Rios (Jamaica); and Nassau (the Bahamas). For more info or to book visit [carnival.co.uk](http://carnival.co.uk) or call 0843 374 2272.