

LUXURY LIVING IS CHILD'S PLAY

The great thing about the Azia Beach Hotel in Cyprus is that it's five-star but not formal. So take the baby and relax, says **Lena Corner**

It's often easier to stay at home than drag a child of an awkward age away on holiday. Fifteen-month-old Ronnie is at that in-between stage where he's just learnt to walk and is terribly excited by his new skill but also frighteningly unsteady. A younger baby is more portable because it will sit in its pram and a toddler you can leave to run off steam. Ronnie doesn't quite do either.

So when our taxi finally swept into the forecourt of the Azia Beach Hotel and Spa, after a fairly fraught four-hour flight, the relief was immense. We checked into our room and popped Ronnie in his cot just in time to crack open a couple of ice-cold Keo beers and catch a blistering red sunset over the Mediterranean from the comfort of the hot tub on our balcony.

The great thing about the Azia is that it does five-star without being formal or turgid. Its brochure is emblazoned with that old "barefoot glamour" cliché, but here it really works. This is the kind of place where a noisy baby at the dinner table gets serenaded by a musician rather than banished to its room. Although it's a fairly average resort set-up, with a pool complex at the centre, a couple of restaurants, gym, tennis courts etc, last year a facelift – the addition of a luxurious Elemis spa along with plenty of muted earthy tones and contemporary styling – shifted it up-market.

Ronnie made himself at home immediately. In the mornings he ate under a canopy of trees in the outdoor restaurant, before taking to the shallowest waters of the pool. When the sun got too high he checked into the kids' club where Sophie and any other passing Azia staff drooled all over him as he tried to play. After a long siesta he would go for a leisurely jaunt to the nearby beach and in the evening a selection of jolly Russian baby sitters could be called upon to sing him to sleep.

This left plenty of time for us to laze by the pool, or, in the evening, catch a taxi into Paphos (a 10-minute drive away), where



BABE MAGNET: child-friendly staff and a luxurious pool and spa complex mean that even the parents of busy toddlers can kick back and relax
LENA CORNER

we indulged in, or rather gorged on, a 30-course fish mezze. The spa facilities were also put to good use – and it's not just a couple of treatment rooms masquerading as a spa, it really is the full works (voted by *Grazia* magazine as one of the world's 10 best new spas). In the adjoining yoga centre I had one of the most vigorous yoga sessions I've ever had.

Fifteen years ago, all this was nothing but a patchwork of fields covered mainly with banana trees. Antis Economides, the owner, had the foresight to buy one. Then, when he had raised a bit more money, he bought another, until he had five on which the Azia now stands.

The only drawback, if it is one, is that we were so firmly ensconced in the comfort of the Azia that our sense of wanderlust was completely dampened. The west coast of Cyprus does not have the big sandy beaches of the other side; instead it has rocks and plenty of tiny, sandy coves. One hot morning, feeling unusually energetic, we caught the number 10 bus to Coral Bay. Lovely for an hour or so, but trying to pin a hot, sticky child down to

the prickly seat on the way back wasn't relaxing.

The more adventurous could hire a Jeep and head on a little further to Cape Lara, a long sweep of unspoilt sand, and see where the green turtles come in to nest. Or, better still, get off the tourist trail and head inland to the villages at the foot of the magnificent Troodos Mountains.

But, as soon as you venture out, there is the Brits-abroad reality check to contend with. Take the road along the coast either to the east or west and you will come across O'Solomon's Irish bar, the Zik Zak club, Sid's pub and any number of other Identikit tourist traps trying to lure you in with offers of beer at knock-down prices. And, as for the number of property companies vying for foreign trade, it will be a wonder if there are any Cypriots left on the island in five years.

Not that any of this bothers Economides. His passion is not so much in the business of running a hotel – he leaves that to his wife and two daughters – but in the workings of his beloved plantation just outside Paphos. There, he cultivates the incredible array of plant-life that covers the

Azia's gardens and also grows around 80 per cent of the fruit used by the hotel – impressive, when you consider there are 250 rooms and 15 bungalows.

So as well as the striking 50ft cerise bougainvillea that grows up the stark white frontage of the Azia, there are palm trees of a type you will never have seen before and huge bushes of lavender, which gets used in the spa. And it is these luscious gardens, which slope down to the cliff edge, that sets the Azia apart from the rest. Economides really has created a luscious oasis in a hot, rocky corner of Cyprus. Even Ronnie, as he raced from the pool to the kids' club, stopped for a split second to show his appreciation for one of the more Jurassic-looking protuberances by beating it repeatedly with his plastic spade.

Argo Holidays (0870 066 7070; argoholidays.com) is offering seven nights at the Azia Club & Spa, Paphos, in an inland room, from £895 per adult, based on two sharing, and £269 per child aged two to 12 years sharing their parents' room, including return flights from Gatwick, transfers and b&b