Grand for all three generations

Madeira did the trick across the ages for **Bettany Hughes**

ADRIAN EVANS

Lunch at the Crowne Plaza for, from left: grandma Erica Hughes, Bettany with four-year-old Sorrel, baby May and grandpa Peter Hughes

ON THE flight to Madeira, a complete stranger invited our entire family — that is grandma, grandpa, my husband, four-year-old Sorrel, baby May and myself, to a cocktail party. The island, traditionally a haven for expats, was already living up to its genteel and eccentric reputation.

Driving through the capital Funchal at midnight, the delights continued. The air was balmy and the town laced with 450,000 lightbulbs left over from Christmas. "It's fairyland, it defina'ly is," gasped Sorrel. "... As good as carnival," said well-travelled hubby. "Perfection," said grandma. "Better than the West End at Christmas...". The holiday had got off to a good start.

Travelling with three generations is regaining its popularity. As teenagers, many of us started to holiday without our parents. But ten or twenty years on, and with our own kids in tow, the idea of the old folks sharing in the fun is a welcome novelty.

We'd hatched the plan over tea one chilly afternoon. But where to go? We wanted fresh air and good cuisine. Exotic locations, but no jabs. Madeira, an aunt said. Madeira, said our groovy advertising agency neighbours. Madeira, the Portuguese subtropical island only 300-odd miles from the West African coast, but closer in spirit to Europe.

Privately fearful that the exercise might end up a giant compromise, I booked into the Crowne Plaza, one of the island's splendid new hotels. As we set off, I thought the whole thing was indeed a terrible, sentimental mistake: we were stuck at Heathrow, being disembarked from the airplane, grandma anxious about the announced technical failure, Sorrel moaning for sweets, baby May deciding this was her moment to learn how to crawl.

Then Madeira started to work its benign magic. The moment we arrived, Sorrel and grandpa began playing cricket in the huge, chic hotel foyer. Staff looked on indulgently as rope balls were thwacked around the minimalist white marble.

Spirits continued to be high on our first outing to the island's interior. Thanks to the tortuous, narrow roads, hearts were also high in our mouths. We saw volcanic landscape worthy of any Harry Potter fantasy and virgin forest, boasting flowers unique to the island, related closely, I'd guess, to the triffids.

A mountain goat befriended Sorrel and a giant butterfly sunned itself languidly on baby May's hat. Centuries of association with the British also means that much is reassuringly familiar. We drove back via Funchal's many public gardens — subtropical equivalents of the National Trust — where we even found homemade cake served among the orchids.

Madeira's gentle climate and pursuits meant we did almost everything en masse — strolls through gardens, boat trips, even horse-riding lessons. But one day we left our parents behind to check out the mystery cocktail party (a fixture after the English Church service) while we headed for the hills. A drive took us higher and higher over a freezing plateau reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands in November. Once in the misty woods, the air sweetened by mimosa, eucalyptus and wild bay, we spotted tree heathers, firecrests and buzzards.

We could see the coastline on either side of the tiny island in glorious sunshine. Courtesy of one of Madeira's 23 playful little microclimates, we were in dripping rain. It's no wonder the majority of the locals sport fantastically woolly bobble hats all year round.

Madeira is light on "visitor attractions": the closest it gets to theme rides are the sailing trips of the *Santa Maria* (a life-size replica of Columbus's boat) and tobogganing down the roads from Monte to Funchal. Ernest Hemingway described the latter as one of the most hair-raising experiences of his life. Sorrel was in ecstasies. Skimming over tarmac and cobbles in a 19th-century wicker sledge has definite old-world frisson.

Most of the island's bigger hotels now have child care facilities, and while Sorrel was daubing paint on two plastic cups in the "kids' spree" I was wrapped in seaweed at the Crowne Plaza's serene thalassotherapy sea treatment centre while my husband had a diving lesson. Watersports and chauffeur-driven tours were also on offer.

My father dangled his aching legs in the hot indoor saltwater pool while my angelic mother looked after the baby.

Even Reid's Palace Hotel, that icon of subtropical luxury and middle-aged respectability is welcoming youngsters during school holidays. I'm not sure the traditional Reid's clientele is delighted with the change of approach — but the hotel's linen sheets, rock pools and Merchant Ivoryesque teas make the odd disapproving glance bearable.

My parents provided something very practical in Madeira — two priceless spare pairs of hands. Even in the most luxurious of hotels there are heart-stopping plummets down sheer cliffs. A discreet bit of wire fence might be enough for a middle-aged middle Englander, but it won't stop a toddler.

The only other drawback for families travelling in Madeira is that, bizarrely, there is no fresh milk on the island, so check that your youngsters are acclimatized to the taste of UHT before they go.

Among our many holiday highlights, food registered highly across the age range. My mum just loved the Friday market in Funchal — stalls groaning under Madeiran produce (mangoes, custard apples, papayas, passion fruit) with pungent herb stalls and outlandish fish.

My husband grew particularly fond of the Crowne Plaza's cocktails. I luxuriated in the peace of our oceanside balcony, lunching on goats' cheeses brought down fresh from the mountains. And my father was delighted to discover, after 70 years of eating pale, English, Madeira cake, that its tropical ancestor is a more wicked, dark, spicy affair.

Sorrel loved the hotel's revolving toasters while baby May, ever jolly, became even jollier when greeted with the cornucopia of tempting finger foods at breakfasts — we counted 64 different options.

Just now, Madeira is charm itself for all generations (it's where Chris Evans chose to take Billie on their romantic tryst) and full of wholesome entertainment. Sorrel still thinks we went to fairyland.

● Bettany Hughes presents *Londoners* on LWT at 5.15pm on Sunday, February 18.

Need to know

■ **Getting there:** Bettany Hughes and family travelled with Caravela Tours (0207-630 9223), which specialises in Madeira, Portugal and The Azores. They stayed at the Crowne Plaza Resort and Reid's Palace Hotel, both in Funchal.

■ **What it costs:** One week over Easter at the Crowne Plaza Resort (departing Heathrow on April 12) is £819 per adult and £330 per child aged 2-11 sharing parents' room, including flights, transfers and B&B through Caravela. One week also over Easter at Reid's (www.reidspalace.orient-express.com) is £1,069 per adult, £271 per child.

■ **Further Information:** www.madeiratourism.org

THE TIMES travel

A family affair
Three generations mellow in Madeira

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