

# The New York Times

ON THE WEB

June 6, 2004

## Supersizing Get-Togethers

By KATE ZERNIKE

MARY-ANN GALLAGHER visited Walt Disney World the week after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, and in the emotion of the time, she looked up at Cinderella Castle in all its candy-colored glory and vowed she would return with all her children and grandchildren.

It took more than two years to pull off what would come to be known as Grandma Gallagher's Great Adventure. Mother, son, daughter and in-laws traded e-mail messages to negotiate everyone's preferences on an ever-shifting itinerary. They bought walkie-talkies and assigned each day a different shirt color -- Saturday, orange; Sunday, light blue -- to make it easier to find their group of 10 among the hordes. They arranged for adjoining rooms with Grandma in the middle, so the adults could have somewhere to hang out without worrying about waking the kids after bedtime.

"It went a lot smoother than we thought it would, especially considering we had four kids under 6," Mrs. Gallagher's son-in-law, Chas Burkhart, said on their last night at the resort near Orlando as the grandchildren mingled with Captain Hook and Mr. Smee and the adults sipped tropical drinks while they waited to board a fireworks cruise.

Of course, Disney was ready for them. The resort has always attracted families, but last fall it made a bid for larger family groups by starting Magical Gatherings, which rearranged restaurants, added personal travel planners and four attractions available only for groups of eight or more: a Peter Pan fireworks cruise, a private safari and dinner at the Animal Kingdom, an International Dinner at Epcot, and a breakfast with Disney characters.

Just as extended families like the Gallaghers have discovered the joy of traveling together, the travel industry has discovered extended families. Resorts, hotels and tour operators are courting them in ways that go far beyond "children stay free," with everything from baby-sitting and family yoga to reconfigured suites, free family portraits and personal concierges to plan events for large groups. Zagat, for example, is offering a new guide to family travel, with parent ratings and reviews on resorts, including categories like "tops for toddlers" and "strollers available." The Winnetu resort, with suites and cottages on South Beach in Martha's Vineyard, promotes its nonsmoking policy as family friendly, and offers grocery delivery to eliminate at least one headache that comes with renting a house with extended family.

The resorts say they are reacting to surveys showing greater interest in traveling in large family groups. According to the 2003 National Leisure Travel Monitor conducted by YPB&R, a travel marketing firm in Orlando, 69 percent of active travelers -- those who had taken at least one overnight trip in the previous year -- cited "spending time with family" as very important or extremely important, up from 57 percent in 2000, and 35 percent of adult leisure travelers took at least one vacation with children the year before, up from 26 percent in 2000. The survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,350 people nationwide.

In another survey of 1,655 active travelers in August, commissioned by Disney and AAA, the firm found that almost 80 percent of active leisure travelers took a vacation with extended family or friends in the past five years. Of those trips, 82 percent were taken with extended family, 68 percent with friends, and 46 percent with other families. The average number of people traveling was seven, but 26 percent of trips included eight people or more.

The firm dubbed the trend "togetherness," which has now become a watchword in the travel business.

Peter C. Yesawich, the managing partner of YPB&R, traces much of it to Sept. 11. "Everybody withdrew for a significant number of months, then as a natural consequence of the turmoil in the world, the uncertainty, people turned for comfort to family," he said.

"I think all of these places discovered family in the late 90's," he added. "They dialed up in terms of promotional dollars post-9/11 because that's where the trend was." In New York City, the epicenter of the attacks, a large increase in family travelers in the year after Sept. 11 allowed the number of travelers to rebound well past 2001 levels, even as business and international travelers stayed away, according to NYC & Company, the city's tourism bureau. Recognizing the potential of the family market, the city produced a new children's book that includes a travel guide, to sell in bookstores nationwide.

"I think people just are terrified of being separated from their families in the event something does happen," said Julian Harrison, the president of Premier Tours, based in Philadelphia, which runs safaris in East and Southern Africa. "And I think people have taken on a whole new perspective on life in general, to be more family-oriented. Family business for us has grown quite dramatically. I'm not saying 9/11 was the sole reason, but it seemed to be a turning point."

Even the camps that Mr. Harrison contracts with in Africa are responding, he said, building bigger family tents with separate rooms. Others have started kids' camps with naturalists whose sole job is to watch children and teach them about the environment.

Some companies are trying to appeal to larger groups with discounts. Lindblad Expeditions, which runs family eco-tours to the Galapagos and Alaska, provides a 5 percent discount for groups of eight or more, and \$500 off for every child under 21. In the last year or so, the family trips have sold out faster than any other, said Carole Rogers, the company's marketing manager. Woodloch Pines, a 250-acre family owned lakeside golf and ski resort in eastern Pennsylvania, offers all-inclusive discounts for groups of 20 or more, and assigns a staff coordinator to send out invitations to group members and book reservations.

Others have designed new programs that try to provide something for everyone in the family, regardless of age. Elderhostel has a grandparent-grandchild "Lord of the Rings" trip to New Zealand this summer, tracing the filming of the Oscar-sweeping movie, which also appealed across the generations. At Nemaacolin Woodlands Resort and Spa, on 2,500 acres in the Laurel Highlands of southwestern Pennsylvania, kids can excavate replicas of dinosaur bones and learn about fossils in a new Dino Discoveries program while their parents visit the spa, or test drive Hummers at the resort's Off Road Driving Academy. (For guests who do not own a Hummer, the resort will provide one.)

THE something-for-everyone idea extends to food, as well. The safari dinner at Animal Kingdom at Disney World generously defines "African cuisine" to include chicken fingers and macaroni and cheese as well as lamb stew and chicken with couscous. Glendorn, a Relais & Chateaux property on the edge of the Allegheny National Forest in northwestern Pennsylvania, serves Champagne as well as s'mores at its bonfires around Skipper Lake.

Club Med, the original singles resort, went family-friendly with its first "family village" in Europe in 1967. This year, Club Med Sandpiper, the family village in Port St. Lucie, Fla., where the electrical outlets have plastic safety plugs and strollers line the pool and bar, began offering family suites -- adjoining rooms that get special turndown service and a delivery of milk and cookies each night, as well as a fridge (there are no minibars at Club Med) with juice and soda, carefully sequestered in the parents' side of the suite. The suites cost about 30 percent more than regular rooms, but guests are greeted with crayons and coloring books, and a list of kids movies on DVD, as well as a baby bed and baby bath if needed (most villages do not have regular bathtubs). The package also includes a family portrait and a Siesta Club baby-sitting service. Parents drop off their children before dinner; the staff will put them in pajamas and coax them to sleep -- or at least try -- before parents return, by midnight, to carry them home.

Lisa Tzur and her husband -- and her next door neighbors and her parents -- chose Club Med Sandpiper in Florida because of the suites, and in particular the Siesta Club. "For us, with three kids at \$25 a night for baby-sitting, it makes sense to pay extra for the suite," said Ms. Tzur, a rabbi in Scottsdale, Ariz. They had planned the trip so that her parents, who live in Florida, could see the grandkids, and had considered a condo, but decided that a resort was better. "With these rooms we're not in each other's places," she said. "And to cook for seven people is a chore. The 5-year-old is not going to want to eat what my father's

going to want to eat."

Extended family often means at least a few friends thrown in; the Tzurs and their neighbors in Scottsdale, Lezli and Geoff Goodwin, have been on three vacations together. "Acquired family," Ms. Goodwin called it. "It's easier than traveling with siblings. With friends, the brattiness factor is neutralized. It's not formal like an organized group, but you're gentler than you are with family."

There are challenges to traveling in big groups. It can be harder to agree on activities and, once there is a plan, to change it. "We're used to doing things in small groups where you can do things spur of the moment," said Susan Allen of Atlanta, who had chosen the private safari at Disney for her group of 23 siblings, aunts, cousins and her own children. "You definitely have to do more planning."

Ginger Coffey, at Disney with her husband and two children and her brother's family -- all from Oklahoma -- was wilting on the fifth day of their trip. "You're parenting for four children instead of two," she said. "There have been moments." But the safari dinner -- \$59.99 for each adult and \$19.99 for children ages 3 to 10 -- allowed them to be in the Animal Kingdom after the day's guests had left, so they could enjoy it without the usual crowds. "We were here yesterday, it was like this," she said, pulling her arms tight to her sides.

There are unexpected benefits, too, as the Gallaghers discovered. The two sets of grandchildren behaved better than they do on trips with their immediate families. "They won't have the meltdown for their aunt the way they will for their mother," said Claudia Gallagher, Mary-Ann's daughter-in-law, who lives in Pennsylvania. The three younger children rose to the level of the two older ones, whether the challenge was more sophisticated food or Splash Mountain. And having a bigger group made it easier to divide into smaller ones by age or interest; Claudia could go with the older boys to the big kids' part of the park while her youngest, age 3, went with his younger cousins to the baby side.

Of course, all that planning helped. Whether by T-shirt or walkie-talkie, no one got lost.

*Copyright 2004, The New York Times Company*