

Destination: The Good Old Days

Trips that focus on honoring and enjoying an enduring circle of friends are the latest vacation trend. *By Marion Winik*

AUNT SALLY STILL brings that same old soupy potato salad. Your brother-in-law Bernard insists on doing the same old magic tricks. And despite the fact that you have kids of your own now, Grandpa Walter still pinches your cheeks. That's how it always seems to go whenever your relatives get together for a reunion. According to the American Society of Travel Agents, one in three Americans attends family reunions, gatherings often held at hotels, at resorts, or on cruise ships. Some people are delighted about vacationing with their extended family, others, well, they aren't so sure.

So try this. Instead of rounding up your hyperactive nephews and loudmouthed cousins, plan a trip with a group of old friends you haven't seen in a long time. This kind of travel, dubbed "togetherness" by travel trend watchers Yesawich, Pepperdine, Brown & Russell, is growing in popularity. Almost eight out of 10 active leisure travelers have taken a group trip in the past five years, says YPB&R executive vice president and partner Dennis Marzella, and "spending time with friends" now rates as one of the top factors in making vacation plans.

I became part of this trend when, out of the blue, I got an e-mail from an old pal at a software company I worked for in the '80s and '90s. We had a lot of fun back then, but I moved away and had been out of touch with most of the group for many years. However, when I heard about the expedition they had planned to a hacienda down in the Yucatán, I decided to pony up and go along.

GOLDEN MEMORIES, GOLDEN MOMENTS

Ten of us flew in from Texas, Pennsylvania, D.C., and London for four days of basking in the Mexican sun — and in the renewed pleasure of each other's company. There was so much to catch up on; the



unlikely stories of various company alumni took days to unfold. We learned how one had found love in her retirement in a cottage in the woods and how another had started a business selling collectibles on eBay. A favorite topic of discussion was our former boss, the man who had brought us together, a leader of incredible charisma and perspicacity who had chucked it all to teach macrobiotic cooking classes.

The 80 acres of Hacienda Petac provided ample room for our meandering conversation. Though not far from happening Cancun and only 25 minutes from the Merida airport, it lies in an unspoiled



region of emerald jungle, exotic wildlife, and ruined temples. Like other haciendas in the area, Petac was built on cattle and sisal fortunes in the 17th and 18th centuries and was designed to support what was at the time perhaps the most luxurious and pampered lifestyle on earth. The treatment we received from the current staff made us feel as though those days hadn't vanished altogether.

On the last night of our trip, the women of the group took a midnight swim. Although three of us had already celebrated our 50th birthdays, and one of us is a respected professor and another a mother of five, this didn't stop us from giggling, splashing, and swigging wine out of the bottle until thoughts of early flights home the next day finally sent us, dripping, off to bed.

FRIENDS FOREVER

The travelers who are making together a hot new travel fad range from schoolmates

and camp friends to those who grew up in the same neighborhood to folks brought together by work or shared interests. Here are a few classic examples.

- Nine earnest young fellows from Yale University, class of '57, formed their own "secret society," which they called the Good Guys of America. Forty years after graduation, all of the Good Guys made it for the first time to an official Yale reunion — and had so much fun that they have since held annual get-togethers, spouses included, rotating through the members' home regions.

- They call themselves the East Side Boys, and they're a gang of cutups who met in the early '60s in elementary school and junior high in Long Beach, California. "We had some of the smartest guys in the school and the most major goof-offs," remembers Don Gabor, now of Brooklyn, New York. Connections survived informally until 1998, when one of the guys suggested they take a group cruise on the first weekend after Mother's Day, and a tradition was born.

- In the fall of 1986, six freshman honor students unpacked their trunks in a suite on the campus of Elon College in North Carolina. Nearly 20 years later, they're still unpacking together — on the reunion trips they take once a year. From the luxurious Inn at Perry Cabin on Chesapeake Bay to the motels they visited on a national park adventure, the former Elon roomies find themselves playing cards and downing snacks, just like they did back in the good old days.

Peter Friedman, an agent with Unique Travel of Delray Beach, Florida, has been booking more and more trips for groups

» WHERE TO GATHER

Cruises and spas are classic destinations for group travel, and resorts large and small now promote buyouts for nonwork group gatherings. Hacienda Petac (www.haciendapetac.com) offers a Mayan adventure in a jungle paradise. It rents by the week for groups of up to 10. Other applicable lodgings include the Château du Sureau (www.chateausureau.com) at the gateway to Yosemite National Park, which boasts 10 rooms and full-on maid and butler service. In Sonoma, California, the five Tuscan-style Brick House Bungalows (www.brickhousebungalows.com) are rented by groups eager to explore the wine country.

» BIG DECISIONS

Friends who plan a trip together face practical decisions from the start. The groups we spoke to came down on different sides of these three questions.

» Bring your spouses?

Pro: They could add to the fun. They don't want to be left out. They're part of who you are now.

Con: They could ruin the fun. They don't want to hear the same old stories a million times. They're part of who you are now.

» Divide up the planning?

Pro: Everybody is part of the decision-making, and everybody does part of the work.

Con: Could overcomplicate things. Letting one person make the decisions each year can vastly simplify matters.

» Split expenses as they occur?

Pro: On big items, like a lodging deposit, it makes sense to pitch in right away.

Con: Results in endless questions, like "Who had the calamari and the three bellinis?" It can be simpler if everyone just holds their receipts for tallying at the end of the trip.

like these. He's planned a diving trip in Belize for a group of veterinarians who went to school together, and he recently arranged a private yacht rental for a bunch of fellows who grew up together in Philadelphia. "I gauge whether the group is looking for soft adventure and luxury treatment, or whether they're more the Outward Bound type," says Friedman. Whenever you plan a group experience like this, he explains, you want to combine time for relaxing and reminiscing with exciting experiences that make new memories.

But whether you raft the Salmon River in Idaho or hit the blackjack tables in Vegas, you'll undoubtedly have as good a time as you've had in years. The secret of these trips is simple: Faces from your past bring with them the carefree energy of those glorious, golden days. **AW**

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