



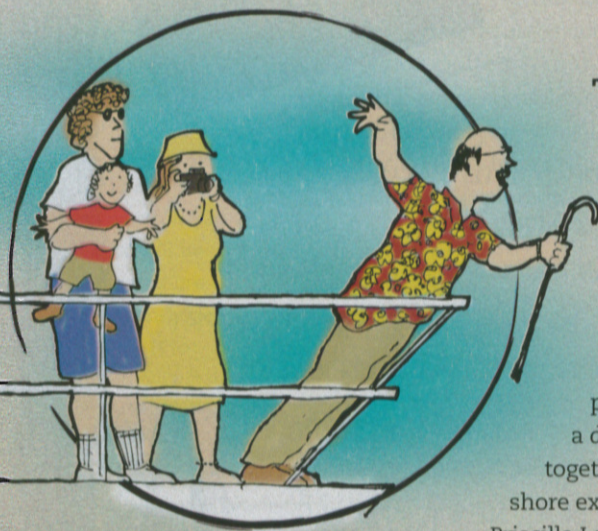
# Great Ways to Gather

## The best destination family reunions offer quality time together—and apart

STORY BY LESLIE MIEKO YAP ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY AL BONOWITZ

**T**ravel and family reunions often go hand in hand, a type of vacation sometimes dubbed a destination family reunion. Instead of meeting for an afternoon at someone's house or at a park, the entire clan takes a group vacation to some distant locale. The vacation becomes the celebration. "Families today are so busy and are often scattered about the country," says Anita Allen, a AAA Travel Agent who has helped numerous families plan such events. "Destination reunions bring them together to catch up and celebrate a special occasion at an exciting location."

Traveling with a large number of family members of different ages can be a lot of fun, but it also presents challenges. Here are some tried-and-true ideas for successfully vacationing with the family in tow.



### TAKE A CRUISE

Cruises are all-inclusive vacations, so nearly everything—meals, some drinks, and entertainment—is figured into the price. That means you don't have to be concerned about divvying up expenses or who's going to pick up the next tab.

And there's plenty to do on a cruise. On today's amenity- and activity-filled ships, everyone in the family can find something that suits their interests: golf lessons, exercise classes, a spa treatment, karaoke, bingo, or just relaxing by the pool. Supervised child and teen programs let kids have their own fun while adults have theirs at a theater, a dance club, a casino, or a fine-dining restaurant. The family can come together later for dinner and a show. Plus, most cruises include a variety of shore excursions (which usually cost extra) that families can enjoy together.

Priscilla Low, a 31-year AAA member, took a vacation with her family of 15 on a Princess Cruise from New York City to New England. The highlight for her father, who's in his 80s, was having afternoon tea every day with his seven grandkids. "Because you're planted in one place, a cruise is especially good for family members who are less active," Low says. Cruises also eliminate the need to prepare meals for a large group, and ships typically have a variety of restaurants to choose from.

In addition, many ships offer group rates and special group amenities. For example, families that book eight staterooms or more with Holland America Line's Family Reunion Program receive one free family photo per stateroom and one free room upgrade. On Princess ships, the onboard services department can help create special customized parties or activities.



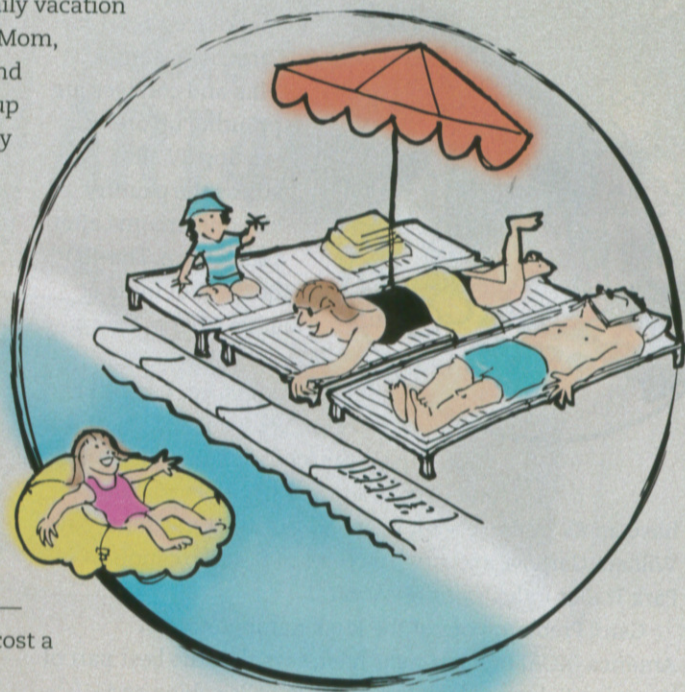
## STAY AT A **RESORT** OR **RANCH**

Resorts and ranches make for an easy reunion destination because they offer a variety of activities on and around the property. Family vacation expert and author Emily Kaufman, who blogs as the Travel Mom, went to 1,259-room Our Lucaya Beach & Golf Resort on Grand Bahama Island with 18 family members. "Each day, we set up at the beach or at the pool, and everybody did whatever they wanted," Kaufman says. "People woke up at their own pace and just hung out." For some family bonding time, they chartered a snorkel boat through a local company.

The downside of their experience, however, was that the vacation ended up being pricey because the resort wasn't all-inclusive. "All our dinners had to be prearranged," Kaufman says. "With a group that size, you can't just walk into any restaurant."

"An all-inclusive resort is definitely more cost-effective," says Hend Hasrouni, a AAA branch manager who supervises travel agents. At the all-inclusive Riu Palace Paradise Island resort in the Bahamas, for example, "the cost of activities—a massage, snorkeling, an introductory scuba lesson in the pool, and all your meals—is included. If you paid separately for those things it would cost a lot more," Hasrouni explains.

Although large resorts offer room to roam, Texans Mary and Larry Maddock prefer a more intimate setting for their annual reunion. Their clan—four adult children, their spouses, and 11 grandkids ranging in age from 5 to 17—has been gathering at the Wildcatter Ranch in Graham, 90 miles northwest of Fort Worth, for five summers in a row. The rustic ranch has 32 guestrooms and suites and two guest houses. Guests at the Wildcatter usually remain on-site for meals and activities, such as fishing, canoeing, and skeet-shooting. "We're small, so it gives families an opportunity to be together," says resort manager Jason McAlister. "Teens can do their own thing, but they're still close by, so you can easily connect at the pool or at mealtimes."



## PLAN A **DISNEY** VACATION

Florida's Walt Disney World, with four major theme parks, offers a Magical Gatherings vacation package for groups of eight or more. Families can enjoy special group experiences called Grand Gatherings, which range from a Disney character meet-and-greet to a safari dinner. Beyond the parks, the resort offers fishing, boating, golf, spa services, and more. So during the day, family members can pursue their own interests then circle back with the rest of the group for dinner to share their experiences. Over the past 27 years, diehard Disney fan Kay Belin, from Valparaiso, Indiana, has organized yearly family trips to Walt Disney World. "I enjoy seeing the magic of Disney through the eyes of all age groups," Belin says.



## GO CAMPING

Visit the Marble Quarry RV Park in California's Gold Country, and you'll discover it's not your grandmother's campsite. But at a place like this, grandma may want to come along for the trip.



RV parks aren't just for RVs anymore. Rental cabins and cottages are sprouting up on existing RV sites across the country like mushrooms after a rainstorm. The 400-square-foot units at Marble Quarry, for example, have

bathrooms, kitchens, and decks. "We wanted to be able to accommodate family reunions

and large groups with people who don't have an RV or don't want to spend the night in a tent," says William Garpow, executive director of the Recreational Park Trailer Industry Association.

Carol Preble, owner of the Rusk Kampground of America (KOA) in Rusk, near Tyler, says that the best part of Camping Kabins (which is what KOA calls cabins and cottages) is that they enable everyone to participate in activities at the family reunion location. "The combination of RV sites, tent sites, and rental accommodations means that people can have true family reunions, where everyone is right there all the time," she says.

An added plus of KOA campgrounds is that most of them have a variety of activities for campers of all ages. The Rusk KOA, for example, has a swimming pool, horseshoes, volleyball, a toddler's playground, and a Frisbee skills course.

Regardless of where you sleep, camping itself is a great bonding experience, which is intensified when multiple generations participate. "Camping encourages an older way of life, when families did things together," Preble says. ★

Your AAA Travel Agent can help you plan a destination family reunion. Visit your local AAA branch, call (866) 567-9217, or go to [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel). Your agent can coordinate group travel to Orlando's Walt Disney World Resort, Anaheim's Disneyland Resort, or on any of the Disney Cruise Line ships. AAA-approved campgrounds, including KOAs, can be found in the AAA CampBook, available at your local AAA branch.

Leslie Mieko Yap is editor in chief of *Texas Journey*. For her recent family reunion in Mammoth Lakes, California, she made T-shirts featuring her family's mon, or crest.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

Here are some tips to help make your destination family reunion a success from start to finish.

**SCHEDULE TOGETHER TIME.** Allow plenty of time for family members to do their own thing, but recognize that the whole point is to reunite with family. At the beginning of the trip, hand out an itinerary that designates specific mealtimes and group activities for those who want to participate. Plan a group hike if you're camping or a family karaoke night if you're on a cruise. Organize a shuffleboard tournament at a resort. During a Holland America cruise to Alaska in 2009, four generations of the Wong clan gathered nightly for a family meeting. "There were 24 of us, and each night a few people would tell us what was happening in their lives," says Audrey Wong, of Tustin, California. "By the end of the cruise, everyone had had a turn."

**ENLIST A TRAVEL AGENT.** When organizing a group function, relying on a travel agent's expertise can save you a boatload of stress. A travel agent can coordinate travel plans, book hotels and cruises, and reserve excursions. An agent can also take care of less obvious details like setting up a group check-in at hotels. "We work on an itinerary with the group leader, make our recommendations, and then put it all together," says AAA Travel Agent Anita Allen.

When Kyle Ann Tolliver of Pomona, California, decided to celebrate her 50th birthday with family members aboard a Carnival cruise to the Mexican Riviera, the first thing she did was call Allen to help her plan it. "Anita was the catalyst," Tolliver says. "She sent me everything I needed. For the invitation, I just cut and pasted her information into a flier and e-mailed it to my guests."

**MAKE FAMILY REUNION T-SHIRTS.** Whether you're strolling around a cruise ship or going on a hike, matching T-shirts not only help you keep tabs on your group, but also give you a sense of togetherness. Emily Kaufman coordinated T-shirts when her family vacationed in the Bahamas. "My grandmother started a tradition of taking pictures of everyone waving. So we made T-shirts with a picture of grandma waving and the words PERLMAN FAMILY REUNION on them." At the Disney Design-A-Tee shop at Walt Disney World's Downtown Disney Marketplace area, you can personalize T-shirts for your entire party.

**TAKE A GROUP PICTURE.** A reunion is the best time to take a formal picture because, finally, everyone is together. On cruise formal nights, professional portrait photographers are often on hand. "My daughter and I took one of our best pictures on the ship," Tolliver says.

**MAKE THE MEMORIES LAST.** Several online companies, such as Winkflash.com and Snapfish.com, enable you to create photo albums that look like coffee table books. Collect reunion photos from family members, make a photo book, and order enough copies for the entire family. Even after the good-byes have been said, you can enjoy the connection with your family through the photos. —L.M.Y.