

Holiday Road

by Laurie Werner | Nov 19 2007

Avoid the stress of hosting this season by gathering the whole family in a luxury resort, villa, or hotel.



On the plus side of the holidays: Family members funnel into your home from far-flung places to eat, drink, and make merry. On the minus side: Family members funnel into your home from far-flung places to eat, drink, and make merry.

The stress of hosting is just one reason that many families these days are taking an alternate route during the holidays—literally.

“Many of my clients have extended families, and they gravitate toward renting houses or villas because they’re ideal for families,” explains Marina Gratsos, owner of London-based Carpe Diem Travel, which specializes in exclusive villa and house rentals around the world.

There are other advantages to gathering families in vacation spots at the end of the year. You can choose a property that is large enough to accommodate everyone comfortably, and at a central location that can be easier to reach for relatives who are spread far and wide. Many spots offer a range of activities that will keep all the generations occupied, and at a resort, you don’t have to burden grandma—or yourself—with cooking, cleaning, and organizing. But, of course, you have to pay for it and plan ahead—sometimes as much as a year in advance.

Booking a house or villa is one option. Families can also take over a block of rooms within a hotel, rent a villa within a hotel or resort—which ensures privacy while still providing access to resort facilities and events—or take over an entire property. And for a fee, you can hire a specialist to arrange it for you instead of doing the work yourself.

First, however, you have to figure out where you want to go. Experts advise choosing a destination with activities that appeal to all ages and interests, and isn't too difficult for everyone to get to. Of course, sometimes that's easier said than done, so communication is key. "We've had some great family trips," says Katie Coakley, a Vail, Colorado, publicist whose extended family, ages 3 to 80, has gone on holiday jaunts for several years. "It's always interesting to see another side of aunts and uncles when they're out of their usual surroundings. But the destinations don't always appeal to everyone. A cruise to the Bahamas, for instance, didn't really do it for the teenagers."

Island and beach destinations are the most popular for holiday home rentals, according to Carpe Diem's Gratsos, with ski destinations not far behind. She advises anyone looking for that perfect property in either type of locale to plan as far ahead as possible. "Anyone who calls a real estate agent in late November looking for a large villa by the sea in the Caribbean is going to be disappointed," she says. But there are always a few possibilities for last-minute deciders: second- or third-tier houses or the occasional A-list home that becomes available because of a cancellation.

She also advises clients to be open to unusual spots. Christmas in Provence or New Year's in Seville can provide unexpected pleasures—a Gratsos client who took a villa in Spain had a memorable Christmas complete with flamenco dancing—and the properties can cost 25 percent less than they would at high season, she says. That means homes in Provence may run about \$20,000 a week at Christmas, down from \$25,000 in the summer.

Travel organizer Pallavi Shah, owner of New York-based luxury-travel company Our Personal Guest, had a client who yearned for a Currier & Ives Christmas in a postcard-perfect New England village. But she had to consider other possibilities because few appropriate properties were available. "Their owners wanted them for their own Christmas," Shah explains. Her suggestion: taking over a small inn in Vermont or going to Newport, Rhode Island, which dresses up its Gilded Age mansions, offers haunted-house tours, and generally lays on the holiday theme with a flourish. (The client is still deciding what to do, including whether to take over the five-room, antique-filled Abigail Stoneman Inn for a cost of about \$2,500 a night.)

Residential developments attached to ski or beach resorts may have availability as well. Often, these are owners' second or third homes, and if they decide to be elsewhere, the houses may go into the hotel's rental group. So a late booker might wind up with one of the townhouses at Topnotch Resort and Spa, in Stowe, Vermont, or a beachfront villa on the Pacific at the Four Seasons Punta Mita in Mexico. Hotel staff can provide meals, Christmas trees, menorahs, and other festive touches, and guests have access to the hotel's spa, sporting, and children's facilities.

The most conventional way to go is to book a hotel. But you can arrange for greater privacy by taking several rooms on one hall (or if the group is large enough, the wing or the whole property). That's the plan of an extended family of eight traveling from California to London this Christmas, says Christopher Cowdray, general manager of the Dorchester in London. "They love London, and it's a great time to be here," he says. "There are carols and services in St. Martin's and St. Paul's, decorations everywhere, skating rinks all over the city." To cater to the holiday crowd, the hotel puts Christmas trees in the rooms, brings in a choir to sing carols in the Promenade, and has a Santa give gifts to children on Christmas Day. It's yet another benefit of leaving home—not having to put on that big red suit yourself.