

A Place for Family Bonding

I couldn't catch my breath. Every time I thought I had stopped laughing, I'd look at one of my sisters and start all over again. My face was wet with tears and I was aware that strangers were staring, but the laughter was like a faucet I couldn't shut off.

To this day, I can't remember what was so funny, but I think it had something to do with a humongous loaf of Corsica bread. Truth is, laughter is usually what I remember most about our family's reunions. Only my siblings have the ability to turn me from serious to silly with nothing more than a look. Planning a multigenerational get-together isn't easy, but the joys of genetic connections are a great reward.

We chose Door County, Wisconsin for our gathering because brother-in-law Bill, with a vacation home there, offered to be our chief planner. It also was a central location for family spread coast-to-coast and the sentimental favorite of the generation raised in the Midwest. In the course of a week, we experienced colorful country taverns, two-lane roads lined with big red »



Door County's Cana Island Lighthouse

« barns, summer stock theater, delicious walleye pike dinners, and — yes — a few mosquitoes. Door County has more than 300 miles of coastline on Lake Michigan and Green Bay and is also known for its large number of historic lighthouses, hiking and biking trails, fishing, art studios, and galleries. (www.doorcounty.com)

We based ourselves on the quiet side of the peninsula at Glidden Lodge Beach Resort in Sturgeon Bay. Here, in one, two, and three-bedroom condos, we overlooked the beach and had easy access to the trails in Whitefish Dunes State Park. Roadside farm stands, Top Shelf Café and Gourmet Grocery, and Door County Bakery — home of the aforementioned Corsica loaf — provided us with everything we needed for pleasantly chaotic family meals.

Since then, my sister's family gathered at Spring Creek Ranch in Jackson Hole, Wyoming to celebrate a significant anniversary, and they are still raving about the phenomenal views of the surrounding Tetons. They also appreciated the good choice of hotel rooms, condos, and houses and the wide range of activities — including a great spa — that suited a group with disparate interests. If Spring Creek Ranch is the site of a future family-wide reunion, I think we'll ask Austin-Lehman Adventures (ALA) to handle the arrangements. This award-winning tour operator is well known for small group adventures, but they also have a great team of custom trip experts who drive shuttles, lead hikes, provide equipment, arrange picnics, and organize appropriate activities for all ages and abilities. (www.springcreekranch.com, www.austinlehman.com)

For one family of 16, ALA set up a mini hot air balloon regatta in Jackson Hole and sent them soaring along the Tetons in six colorful balloons.



Glidden Lodge Beach Resort

Another time, they hired a chef to cater a mountaintop feast in honor of a milestone birthday. Instead of providing run-of-the-mill childcare, ALA guides set up “kids-only” outings, which range from introductory rock climbing to summer snowball fights.

ALA operates in North, Central, and South America, as well as Africa, and can organize custom trips in all these areas. At Whistler in British Columbia, their guests stay at the lovely Fairmont Chateau. Here, the guides with one custom trip realized that several in the family were avid fly-

fishermen. The easy thing would have been to load them into a van and head to a local river, but ALA arranged for a floatplane to zip the anglers off to a remote lake for a day of gleeful multigenerational male bonding.

Cruise ships are also a popular alternative for family reunions. I can't imagine choosing one of the mega-ships, but small vessels like *Crystal Serenity* or *Symphony* work well as long as someone in the group makes arrangements ahead of time for onboard meals in suitable settings and bespoke off-ship excursions.

Austin-Lehman Adventures bike tour





The Terrace, Villa le Rouret, France



Villa La Limonaia, Tuscany

An even better idea would be to charter a yacht for a totally private family adventure. This way, special interests can be accommodated and no one has to worry if grandpa falls asleep in the lounge or someone's toddler gets cranky at an inopportune moment.

In the Galapagos, Ecoventura operates three identical first-class vessels that sleep 20 passengers in ten outside-facing cabins with a window or porthole, A/C, and en suite bathrooms. Guides lead groups of no more than ten ashore so that everyone gets face time with giant tortoises and a chance to watch the courtship dance of blue-footed

boobies. A comfortable boat takes serious divers to delve underwater, and others can paddle clear-bottom kayaks and snorkel with penguins. A well-stocked bar is adjacent to the dining room, and lounge chairs on the sundeck are perfect for stargazing. (www.ecoventura.com)

American Safari Cruises offers similarly private and customized charter opportunities on their yachts in Alaska (summer), Hawaii (winter, spring) and the Sea of Cortez (winter). I wrote about our experiences on the Safari Quest, including snorkeling with sea lions, in the October 2005 issue of *Ranch & Coast*. (www.amsafari.com)



Now I'm engrossed in a search for the right Tuscan villa to accommodate our family next summer. This seems like a great way for a 90-year-old great-grandmother to spend time with three younger generations and the perfect place for the newest member of our family to celebrate his first birthday.

Father/son fishing trip on American Safari Cruise

Wimco Villas has 1,600 properties on their books, spread across the Caribbean and Europe. Their concierge service includes pre-stocking the pantry, making restaurant reservations, and arranging for childcare. (www.wimco.com)

However, I'm leaning towards "La Limonaia," a pair of converted farmhouses near Lucca managed by Sanctuary Villas & Apartments. The company confirms their rates in U.S. dollars and goes out of their way to make sure families have a good experience. In one case, this included finding homes for a litter of kittens born to a stray cat that clients had adopted. (www.sanctuary-villas.com)

Regardless of where we stay, I know my lasting memories of the reunion will be the laughter we shared and the joy of family connections. — Elizabeth Hansen, photography by Adams/Hansen Photography