

The Leader of the Pack

To get a couple and its growing brood of twenty-two on vacation, someone has to take charge.

Sound complicated? Family travel always is.

BY HEIDI MITCHELL

TWICE A YEAR, we spin the globe and pick a destination, haul out the oversized suitcases and venture on a family vacation. One trip is devoted to my husband's Scottish clan, which now tallies sixteen and counting; the other is reserved for my extremely picky parents, siblings and nieces, who live all over the world. Because I'm the designated travel agent, hundreds of e-mails flood my in-box in the months preceding takeoff. A certain sister doesn't want to fly across the country. One mother thinks that a particular villa won't do. A sister-in-law insists that her daughters need "horses and a pool" to ensure a successful holiday. Creating the ultimate itinerary is a herculean task.

In fact, planning a family vacation (which

has become a sort of second job for me) is a science, a complex equation that's part ease of access and part fun for all ages, with the promise of perfect weather and nonstop flights, good food and comfortable accommodations that aren't too nice, lest the children stain the antique sofa with chocolate milk. I remember taking my parents to Scotland for the first time a decade ago, on a road trip up the west coast to Skye. I carefully planned each stop, making sure to hit the best restaurants and the most scenic distilleries. Every morning when we'd carry my mother's two leaden suitcases down the creaking steps of yet another castle and load them into the trunk, my father would complain, "We're getting into the car again?" Yes,

Dad—this is a *road* trip! On another sojourn in my husband's homeland, this time with my in-laws (there were thirteen of us), I tried to mix things up: we spent half our week at a Victorian hydro hotel and spa in a self-catering lodge (with horses and a pool, naturally), where the dads splashed around in an indoor water park with the kids while the moms slaved away at the stove; the remaining days were spent at a fabulous castle with a Michelin-starred restaurant. At the end of the week, my husband whinged that the hydro was too down-market, the castle too fancy. Really, I can't win.

Those imperfect adventures have provided us with priceless memories and wonderful photos, and in hindsight, they



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are always the best weeks of the year. But the amount of work required to craft those expeditions never seems to diminish, even now, when I've planned a multigenerational holiday more than a dozen times. At least all that experience has left me with a few strategies. Rule No. 1: You can't please everyone (but you should try to please whoever is paying). No. 2: Sometimes, you just have to let go and be a kid. No. 3: Should all else fail, hire a professional.

ILLUSTRATION BY IZAK ZENOU

This past August, following all my golden rules, we had a roaring success in Scotland. The Mitchell family, ranging in age from eight months to sixty-seven years, rented a cottage on the island of Colonsay (pop. 108). To get there from my husband's hometown of Stirling, we loaded up four cars with food, drove three hours to Oban, then took a two-hour ferry to the Inner Hebrides. No televisions, no cell service and only one shower. Did I mention that

there were sixteen of us? And a dog? My mother and her two heavy suitcases, neatly packed with an outfit for each day, would have been on the first ferry back—but the Mitchells, they're a hardy clan (and, being Scottish, quite frugal: they'd stick out the prepaid week regardless). Every day we hiked among the sheep and played on the barren, windswept beaches; my brave four- and six-year-old nieces even got naked and danced in the waves when the summer air temperature was only fifty-five degrees, bless them. Every night at 5:00 P.M.—dubbed “wine o'clock” by the seven grandchildren—we opened some Bordeaux, cooked dinner together, then lingered over dessert.

Just in case, I had enlisted a custom-trip planner (see Rule No. 3), David Tobin, of Dream Escape, to organize a few days of professional entertainment. One day, Nicola Abram, from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, took the kids tide pooling. Another day, Kevin Byrne—who looks like Santa and knows every rock on the island—had us hiking up cliff sides and into caves on a geological tour. Four leathery fishermen loaded us onto boats and sped us through the mist to the Isle of Jura. I had to scramble along a 100-yard rockface with my eight-month-old in a pouch to get to our beach dining spot; when we got there, wouldn't you know it, mist turned to rain and the midges moved in for the attack. I told my six-year-old that this was one of those moments that we'd laugh about later, so we might as well laugh now. Calamities and calamine lotion notwithstanding, it was during that week that I fell

in love with my nieces ("Auntie Heidi lets us wear makeup!") and truly bonded with my brother-in-law. And the grandkids—they are all now the best of friends.

My side of the family is entirely different. We like a serviced villa on the sand and access to fine restaurants and an international airport, thank you very much. The modernist seaside house in Punta Mita that we rented for our annual Thanksgiving week together four years ago was a winner: margaritas when you wanted 'em, downtown Puerto Vallarta just forty-five minutes away, even a stuffed turkey on Thursday. But that was when the kids were babies; now they need more activities if we actually want to relax. (A house in the Bahamas with no kids' club or nanny taught us that lesson later.) A week with Crystal Cruises, sailing from Barcelona to Casablanca, worked beautifully. So did our time at One&Only Palmilla, in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. And, surprisingly, one of our favorite recent trips was to Club Med Ixtapa Pacific, also in Mexico. My four-year-old still talks about the trapeze six months later, and my six-year-old wants to study archery. For the first time in years, I actually got a tan and read a 1,000-page book (it was by Ken Follett, but still). Activities, activities: this is my new mantra.

It is now spring, and I'm working on the Mitchell trip for the summer, probably to another remote corner of Scotland. We're going to try exotica for Christmas and hit the shores of Tunisia; no direct flights, perhaps, but certainly the promise of sunshine. Seven months out, my side of the family's Thanksgiving vacation is just a collection of ideas: a week in Phuket, but only if direct flights to Bangkok are reinstated; a villa vacation in the Southern Hemisphere, with professional nannies in tow; maybe a cultural journey to Israel and Egypt, led by a top-notch guide. Whatever new solution we eventually agree on, I'm going into the planning phase with Rule No. 1 in mind: You can't please them all. So at least try to have some fun yourself.

TOGETHER, WHEREVER WE GO

For every type of family, there is a great trip waiting to be memorialized in a photo album. Here are some that have been successful for my clan (and a few that I dream of taking).

For Traditionalists

► **The Cloister at Sea Island, Georgia** Whip out the polo shirts and khakis for a sun-kissed week at Sea Island, where kids can work at their scavenger-hunting skills and grown-ups can learn to shoot clay pigeons. One year we will do Christmas here; at night, an elf (actually a college student) tucks in the little ones. *Doubles from \$495. 800-SEA-ISLAND; seaisland.com.*
► **Washington, D.C.** Springtime surrounded by cherry blossoms, dozens of free museums, our nation's capital: you can't go wrong taking the grandparents and the children to Washington. We like to stay at the Ritz-Carlton Georgetown and let the kids run wild in the tunnels of red brick connecting the wings of this former incinerator. *Doubles from \$499. 3100 South Street NW; 202-912-4100; ritzcarlton.com.*

For Action Seekers

► **Four Seasons Resort Costa Rica at Peninsula Papagayo** What better way to offset a rugged adventure (zip lines! rappelling! kayak tours!) than to spend the night at the Four Seasons? The Private Residence Villas have views of two beaches and enough space for everyone to spread out in. *Doubles from \$595, two-bedroom villas from \$3,175. 800-332-3442; fourseasons.com/costarica.*
► **The Resort at Paws Up, Montana** No one does "glamping," or glamorous camping, better than Paws Up, where large families can take over the whole of Creekside, a campground with six canvas-tented bedrooms and suites and a mess hall. If the tents are too Outward Bound, twenty-eight en suite cabins are also sprinkled around the 37,000-acre resort. *Creekside tents from \$825 a night (only in summer), cabins from \$1,280 a night, including meals. 800-473-0601; pawsup.com.*
► **Dream Escape, Scotland** David Tobin knows every castle for rent and laird with a tale to tell in Scotland—so if you're looking

to go beyond the typical golf resorts, meet real people and have some real adventures, he's your man. *From \$1,500 per day. 011-44-845-260-1085; www.dreamscape.co.uk.*

For Beach Bunnies and Bums

► **One&Only Palmilla, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico** The KidsOnly camp at One&Only is unparalleled. On our most recent holiday there, my boys made their own piñatas and received custom presents from Santa, who arrived at the beach by boat. *Doubles from \$575. 866-829-2977; oneandonlyresorts.com.*
► **The Veranda Resort, Turks and Caicos** What a concept! The newly opened Veranda, on Grace Bay, is a high-end, all-inclusive resort purpose-built for families. The beach-front property has three pools (including one just for the kids), Sony PlayStations and huge guest quarters (some sleep up to eight). *One-bedroom suites from \$632 per person per night, double occupancy. 877-945-5757; veranda.tci.com.*
► **Rosewood Little Dix Bay, Virgin Gorda, British Virgin Islands** The long, calm beach is ideal for splashing in the waves, and the Children's Grove provides shelter from the sun in an engaging 2,500-square-foot setting. The villas and beach houses are ideal for unwinding after a day spent on a deserted islet or learning how to tack and hoist a jib. *Doubles from \$450, beach houses from \$2,800. 284-495-5555; littledixbay.com.*

For Nostalgia Hunters

► **Camp Arcadia, Maine** Just one week every August, this ninety-five-year-old traditional summer camp opens its cabins to families, who can act like kids during trail rides, canoe trips and lakeside picnics. After they've washed off the sand, parents can attend the nightly social hour, where cocktails and conversation flow freely. *\$600 per adult per week, all-inclusive; children from \$300 per week. 207-655-CAMP; camparcadia.com.*

► **The Point, Saranac Lake, New York** For the first time, the eleven classic Adirondack guest suites at this 1930s-style Rockefeller camp are welcoming children: during spring break and over Thanksgiving week. On warm days, guests can play horseshoes and badminton or take a vintage motorboat onto Upper Saranac Lake, then fill up with a fireside supper in the Great Hall. *Doubles from \$1,350. 800-255-3530; thepointresort.com.*

► **The White Elephant Hotel Residences, Nantucket** Go back to a time when summer meant bicycling to the beach and clambakes at sunset. The White Elephant's one-, two- and three-bedroom layouts offer all that, plus modern amenities like Xboxes to entertain teenagers. *Rooms from \$500. 800-445-6574; whiteelephanthotelresidences.com.*

► **The Breakers Palm Beach** The Breakers loves kids and vice versa: there's a junior golf school, five pools, a camp where parents can participate (or not). Children stay free, and up to three rooms can be joined together, making one huge suite (babyproofing is taken care of) that's suitable for any rambunctious brood. *Doubles from \$499. 888-BREAKERS; thebreakers.com.*

For Peripatetic Types

► **Crystal Cruises** During holiday and summer European cruises, activities include arts-and-crafts projects for tots and disco and pool parties for teens. Thanks to a children's clubroom and a teen center (a rarity on luxury ships), adults are free to enjoy the Nobu restaurant, the spa and art lectures on board. Plus, this summer kids sail free on two of the new European cruises. *From \$4,210 per person, double occupancy, including at least \$500 per couple in shipboard credits. 888-799-4625; crystalcruises.com.*

For Ski Addicts

► **Beaver Creek, Colorado** Beaver Creek is so family-friendly, there are not one but two hotels that I recommend. For the tiniest of skiers, the Ritz-Carlton, Bachelor Gulch (*doubles from \$774; 970-748-6200; ritzcarlton.com*), offers a full-day ski school with a healthful lunch and evening activities that run until

10:00 P.M. Teenagers might prefer Park Hyatt Beaver Creek (*doubles from \$499; 970-949-1234; beavercreek.hyatt.com*), where night skiing is available once a week and laser tag and ice-skating are on offer nearby.

► **Snowmass, Colorado** My family loves to ski Snowmass's wide intermediate runs—and when we get supercompetitive, we can easily speed over to Ajax Mountain, at Aspen. The recent upgrade of the resort town includes a 25,000-square-foot kids' center and the design-forward Viceroy Snowmass hotel (*doubles from \$425; 970-923-8000; viceroysnowmass.com*).

For Lovers of the Exotic

► **India and Beyond With Abercrombie & Kent** Sign up for a group trip to India, Morocco or Africa, or have an expert customize the itinerary of your dreams. Either way, Abercrombie & Kent will enlist chaperones and devise age-appropriate activities (and food) for everyone. My fantasy is A&K's India: A Kaleidoscopic Adventure, during which everyone rides on elephants and the kids learn to make curries. *Thirteen-day India trips from \$8,320 per adult. 800-554-7094; abercrombiekent.com.*

► **Asia With Remote Lands** Two years ago, my mother, my elder son (he was then four) and I went on perhaps my most memorable trip ever, to China. Remote Lands arranged every detail: nighttime babysitters, a visit to a farmer's home, dumpling-making classes, kite flying and opera-mask painting. To this day, Gideon is still the best in the family with chopsticks. *From \$1,000 per person per day, all-inclusive. 646-415-8092; remotelands.com.*

For Those Who Need Their Own Staff

► **Mustique, in the Caribbean** Because the 1,400-acre island is populated mainly by homeowners and their staff (excluding the Cotton House hotel) and few cars roam the roads, parents who rent one of the seventy-four villas can rest easy while their kids play pickup basketball. *Villa rentals from \$5,000 a week. 784-488-8500; mustique-island.com.*

► **Punta Mita, Mexico** Now that Punta Mita, near Puerto Vallarta, on Mexico's Pacific coast,

is being built up (note the new St. Regis), there are more serviced villas than ever to rent. Once we stayed at the modern Casa Valerie (*from \$960 per night, six-night minimum; casavalerie.com*) and loved it; another time we rented a house through Mita Residential (*from \$4,200 per week; mitaresidential.com*). Next time, I'd pick a villa at the upgraded Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita so that we could use its facilities: kids' club, restaurant, golf (*doubles from \$430; 011-52-329-291-6000; fourseasons.com/puntamita*).

For Unfussy Travelers

To enjoy this type of trip, you have to be willing to let go and be a kid (Rule No. 2). If you do, I personally guarantee a great vacation.

► **Club Med** Twenty-five years ago, my parents took their four kids to Club Med Ixtapa Pacific; we were all pleasantly surprised when we went back this past Thanksgiving. All rooms have been upgraded at most properties (though they are not luxurious by any stretch), and the food is now pretty good. Staff members genuinely love their jobs; you can't help but love the staff, too. If you have an infant, make sure to book at a property with a baby club. *From \$200 per person per night, all-inclusive. 800-CLUB-MED; clubmed.us.*

► **Disney Cruise Line** Our three-night Bahamian itinerary could not be improved upon. One day was spent at Atlantis, another on Disney's private Bahamian island, Castaway Cay, which has an adults-only beach and an outdoor kids' activity area, where the children cavort with Mickey and Captain Jack Sparrow. On day three we sped through Disney World, then caught the last flight home. *From \$349 per person for a three-night cruise, double occupancy, all-inclusive. 800-DCL-2500; disneycruise.com.*

► **Atlantis, the Bahamas** The kiddie heaven that is Atlantis has lots to entice adults as well: a luxury hotel, the Cove; a Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant; shops galore. For real kids, the sprawling resort has just added the Atlantis Kids Adventure, an 8,000-square-foot center where concierges (really!) help them craft perfect itineraries, such as cooking classes or a game of Rock Band. *Doubles from \$505. 888-877-7570; atlantis.com.* ✕