

The Philadelphia Inquirer

THE ALL-AGES GRAND TOUR

GET OUT THE PLASTIC, POP-POP: "GRAND TRAVEL," MULTI-GENERATIONAL JAUNTS PAID FOR BY THE ELDER CONTINGENT, IS A FUN WAY TO GET TOGETHER AND MAKE MEMORIES.

By Catherine Laughlin
FOR THE INQUIRER

It all began as an experiment. Five years ago, Harriet Uris' husband, Jack, was turning 60, and the couple wanted to celebrate in high style. But there would be no invitations written, no ballroom rented, no Mylar balloons strung.

Instead, the Urises invited their family — their son, two daughters, a son-in-law, and two grandchildren — on a memory-filled trip to an all-inclusive resort in the Turks and Caicos Islands, with the Urises footing the \$15,000 bill.

"It just made sense to be with the people we cherish the most," the Cherry Hill resident said of the week spent sunbathing with the grandkids, dining on freshly caught fish, and swilling coconut-laced drinks.

As with most experiments, the results are what mattered. "It was wonderful!" Uris, 61, remembered. So much so that two years later the Urises took 30 extended-family members to Mex-

ico's Riviera Maya to celebrate her father's 90th birthday. And last year when Uris was turning 60, she and other family members partied in the Dominican Republic.

The Urises are trailblazers in a trend of multigenerational travel, called "grand travel," which is big and getting bigger.

More than ever, said Jim Lardear, spokesman for AAA's travel division, three generations of a family are booking adventure tours and checking into exclusive resorts, with grandparents picking up the tab — and savvy travel representatives are taking notice.

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, AAA — which has 12 stores in the Philadelphia region — saw an uptick in these kinds of trips at a time when airline bookings were sagging. Families were choosing to spend more time together, and AAA seized the opportunity to publish "Traveling With Your Grandkids," a guidebook full of tips and splashy ideas for grandparents planning such a trip.

Even more grandparents are
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footing the bill today.

According to the United States Tour Operators Association, a consortium with 45 members that own and operate more than 150 brands, 50 percent of its clients cited an increase in grand travel in 2011, and of that number, 30 percent reported an increase of 10 percent or more from 2010.

The beauty of the organized tour, said president Terry Dale, is that it allows three generations of family members to come together, but each member can branch out and take a break from the rest. In the same day, the men can play golf, the women can take a hike, and the kids can go snorkeling — then they reunite at dinner.

It's also a way for seniors to enjoy sharing their money with their kids now, instead of stashing their cash for an inheritance, said Stan Molotsky, president of the SHM Financial Group, with three offices in South Jersey. "If they want to spend their money on a great trip, I'm all for it. My job is to encourage my clients how to properly manage their money."

And more grandparents are heeding his advice.

"I see a lot of seniors taking their families away to resort resorts or heading out on lavish cruises in the Caribbean to celebrate milestones like anniversaries and birthdays," Molotsky said, who has taken his own two sons and their families away on vacations. "I tell them, 'Look, enjoy life while you can.'"

In fact, many of today's graying population have more wealth to revel in the good life, Molotsky says, especially in contrast to twenty- and thirtysomethings,

who are “taking longer to land on their feet” while they finish their educations and try to buy houses.

Added Molotsky’s son, Lee Molotsky, a principal in the firm, “When you think about it, some statistics show that the average inheritance is spent within 90 days. It’s better to enjoy your money with your family when you’re alive.”

As more people have to pick up and move to take advantage of scarce job opportunities, families are yanked apart, and multigenerational vacations offer rare, unfettered time between grandparents, their children, and especially their grandchildren.

Three years ago, Karen Schwartz’s oldest son moved to China to finish a doctoral

degree. So it seemed like a no-brainer when the Schwartzes’ other two sons suggested that the entire family travel to China for a visit.

Schwartz, 59, and her husband, Gary, 62, babysat their grandsons, while the younger adults (including a daughter-in-law and one son’s girlfriend) went sightseeing in the city of Shenzhen and hit the nightlife in Macau, a tourism-and-gaming-centric resort near Hong Kong.

The price of the vacation paid for by the Schwartzes: \$20,000. The memories: priceless.

“Seeing my family together, I had a smile on my face from ear to ear,” said Schwartz. “Nothing is better than that.”

Tauck Tours, an 87-year-old leisure travel company, noticed the grand-travel trend after 2001, and two years later launched Tauck Bridges (as in, build bridges between the ages), offering trips such as Call of the Cowboy Country in Wyoming, Safari Time in Africa, and Jungles and Rain Forests in Costa Rica. All yell adventure for grandkids, grown children, and seniors who are

more fit, more hip, and a far cry from the Geritol generations of the past.

Company spokesman Tom Armstrong wouldn’t share figures, but he said that since the Connecticut-based Tauck targeted grand travel, bookings had “soared,” and revenue had been “robust” each year for trips starting at \$2,299 a person.

Marylee Alperin and her husband have now hosted five grand travel vacations, the first of them 15 years ago after she finished treatment for breast cancer.

“My grandchildren were little, and we thought it would be really relaxing for all of us to unwind on a beach,” said Marylee, 72, who with her

husband, Stuart, spent a week at Club Med Sandpiper Bay in Port St. Lucie, Fla., with their two daughters, two sons-in-law, and four grandchildren.

“I look at them as investments,” said Stuart, 75, who has paid between \$10,000 and \$20,000 for each sun-soaked escape. “This way, I’m enjoying our money with my family.”

Last March, the Marlton couple marked their 50th wedding anniversary and decided to book a cruise. With two grandchildren in college and one in high school, the Alperins say coordinating a family vacation

seemed to come to a halt.

Or so they thought.

Turned out their two daughters, along with two of their grandchildren, surprised them by accompanying the couple on the cruise.

Said Stuart, “Last year, I

told my 19-year-old granddaughter that she may not want to keep going on vacations with us, since she’s getting so busy. And she said, ‘Pa Pa, as long as you keep paying, I’m going to keep going.’”

“Seeing my family together, I had a smile on my face from ear to ear. Nothing is better than that.”