

Destination: Family Fun

Pack your bags! It's time to start planning for a destination reunion that will bring the whole family together.

By Julie Collins

As the sun rose over the C.O.D. Ranch near Oracle, Arizona, the first generation of the Okuno family gathered in a large barn for tai chi. Soon members of the second and third generations—all of whom were gathered for the Okuno family reunion—trickled in. Some joined in the tai chi exercises, others tried basic hula dancing moves

with a cousin from Hawaii. Soon after, a day of busy reunion activities commenced. But the next day, many of the 36 family members gathered in the barn again, and exercising and dancing became a morning ritual.

The Okuno family pack their bags and travel to locations such as Lake Tahoe, California; Breckinridge, Colorado; and

Oracle for a week-long family reunion every three years. Like the Okunos, more families are choosing to move beyond the backyard for destination family reunions. Whether you're embarking on a cruise or renting cabins at a ranch, these reunions provide an opportunity to travel, spend time with family, and create memories that span the generations.

Destination reunions allow the entire family to escape from daily life and enjoy their time together. Regardless of the activities that are offered on the trip, the memories will last a lifetime.

Of course, reunion travel requires plenty of coordination and organization. "It can all be boiled down to one thing: planning," says Laurence Basirico, a professor of sociology at Elon University in North Carolina and author of *The Family Reunion Survival Guide*. Use the following pointers to help your family create a memory-filled gathering:

Start early. With a variety of budgets, schedules, and desires to consider, organizing a destination reunion can be challenging. Begin planning at least six months in advance. Even earlier is better, particularly if you have a large family or if the reunion will occur during busy travel times. The Okunos begin thinking about their next reunion while they're still on their reunion trip. "We put up brochures for various places and have people give feedback on where we

should go next," Sarah Okuno says. "And at the end of the reunion, we hand out a survey to find out what people like and dislike and what they would like to do next."

Explore the options. Once the dates are set, determining where to go may be the most difficult part. Ask for input, and think about what fits your family. "We know we have a window in July," Sarah says. "Then it's a matter of figuring out where we can go that we can afford and get to."

Look for destinations that appeal to everyone. If most of your family lives in one part of the country, you may wish to stay at a nearby resort to reduce travel. Then again, a cruise or all-inclusive resort is a good option if the funds are available. Basirico says that destination reunions often work best when everyone travels. "Then everybody's on more or less equal

footing," Basirico says. "You create a sense of community, which is important to do at reunions. It also creates a sense of adventure."

Consider lodging. The Okunos try to keep all of the family under one roof—or, when they went to Oracle, in two casitas—rather than booking individual rooms. "When you take the whole family away from their homes, phones, and routines, they have more focus on each other," Sarah says. "For a week you stay up late talking and laughing. You get to know each other and share more."

Communicate. Making decisions ahead of time without stepping on toes requires communication. Be willing to ask for input from the family, keep everyone updated, and assign duties. The Okunos communicate by e-mail

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and phone. Creating a family reunion website or discussion board also may increase involvement.

Create structure. Basirico stresses the importance of structuring the reunion long before the departure date. “If you take the decision-making out of the reunion, people can focus on why they’re at the reunion—then it’s not about *me*, it’s about *we*,” he says. Plan who will cook meals, where people will sleep, who is on cleanup duty, and some shared activities in advance. “Taking care of those things beforehand and structuring it gets some of the key issues out of the way,” Basirico adds. “But there’s still freedom for someone to sit on the porch and watch the waves all day if they want to.” Delegation is important too—for meals the Okuno men are in charge of barbecuing one night, while the first generation makes sushi another. Someone else has the job of shopping for groceries.

Make memories. Once all the planning is in place and the family arrives, the real fun begins. One of the best parts about destination reunions is the opportunity to make memories. “Meals are a great way to get everybody together, to talk about things, to reminisce,” Basirico says. Shared rituals also bring the family together. During the first Okuno reunion, members of the first generation who were forced into internment camps during World War II sat down with the rest of the family to answer questions about their life experiences. Since then, the family has held several similar discussions and even records their answers. “Our family is kind of extraordinary because we can all sit together in the same room for many nights without arguing,” Sarah says. “I don’t know how we do it!” Such moments underscore that regardless of location or activities planned, reunions really are all about family. ■

Where to Go?

Options for destination family reunions range from quiet beach vacations to action-filled excursions. Not sure what fits your family? Consider these categories.

- **RESORTS.** Regardless of what kind of vacation you wish to take, there’s probably a resort that caters to your needs. With all-inclusive resorts—from family-run locations in Vermont to Club Med in the Bahamas—accommodations, meals, beverages, and entertainment are all included, so planning is easy.
- **CRUISES.** Much like all-inclusive resorts, cruises typically include everything except drinks, gratuities, and shore excursions in the price. And with a plethora of options for food and fun—on the ship and at ports along the way—there are bound to be activities to please everyone, whether you’re sailing through the Caribbean or the waters off Alaska.
- **RANCHES.** Spending time on a ranch in Colorado or Wyoming is often like going to camp, with plenty of outdoor activities for all

ages. Horseback rides, hiking, and doing crafts during the day give way to evenings spent roasting marshmallows around the campfire.

- **AMUSEMENT PARKS.** Perhaps the most popular amusement park destination, Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, provides deals for large groups or families who stay and play. Or plan your own amusement park outing by planning a vacation near a Six Flags destination. Another option: the Wisconsin Dells, where family resorts and water parks offer a variety of recreation options in one area.
- **SHARED HOMES.** Make any place you want to travel to a reunion-worthy destination by renting a large house, condos, or cabins. It’s an economical way to escape together—with kitchens available, you won’t need to eat out for every meal, and splitting the cost of lodging saves everyone money.

