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LIFE

## When Your Travel Buddies Are Your Actual Buddies

Tour operators and travel agents are seeing a big increase in the number of people traveling with groups of friends



Robin Richards Donohoe (bottom, second from right) and some of her college sorority sisters celebrated their 50th birthdays with a bicycle trip to Maine, which included a stop at Acadia National Park. *PHOTO: MARIAH GROVER*

By **ANDREA PETERSEN**

July 20, 2016 1:48 p.m. ET

When Robin Richards Donohoe was thinking of taking a trip to celebrate her 50th birthday last year, she knew who the perfect travel partners would be: 12 of her college sorority sisters.

Ms. Richards Donohoe and her friends, who were also celebrating their 50ths, spent six days biking, hiking and kayaking in Maine. They had long dinners where they reminisced about their college days at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“I just loved spending time with these women, many of whom I hadn’t had a good visit with in 20 years,” says Ms. Richards Donohoe. She left her husband and four children at home in San Francisco.

Hotels, tour operators and travel agents say they are seeing a big

increase in the number of people traveling with groups of friends, whether it is several couples renting a villa together in Italy or the Caribbean, groups of girlfriends getting together for a spa weekend or roving birthday bashes. In recent years, hotels have built large villas and offered special packages with extras like dinners and rounds of golf to attract groups.

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SOME WAYS TO MAKE A TRIP WITH A GROUP OF FRIENDS GO SMOOTHLY:

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- Know your friends' quirks, and make sure they mesh with your own.
- Choose a ringleader. If the decision-making process is too democratic, you may end up going nowhere.
- Hire a cook. If you're renting a house with friends, no one wants to be stuck cooking and cleaning during vacation. Splitting the cost several ways can make the price surprisingly affordable.

Growth in group travel has been fueled largely by extended families and multigenerational vacations. Now groups of couples and singles are jumping in.


Companies like Airbnb have made renting large houses much easier. New apps like Travefy and ComboTrip aim to streamline the logistics of wrangling the multitudes. Tour operators, too, are modifying their offerings to be more inviting to friends' trips.

Some 34% of travelers took at least one vacation with friends during the past year, according a 2016 survey of nearly 3,000 U.S. adults who had been on an overnight trip in the past year, by marketing and research firm MMGY Global. About half of millennials had traveled with friends in the past year, compared with 30% of Generation Xers and 26% of baby boomers. Overall, about 29% of the travelers surveyed said they were planning to take more vacations with friends during the next year.

Spouses often aren't included. "We're seeing a lot of guys' hunting trips, girls' weekends, that sort of thing," says Steve Cohen, MMGY vice president, research and insights.

Veterans of trips with friends say you need to pick your travel partners wisely.


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"You really have to know the quirks of the people you travel with and have your neuroses mesh," says Susan O'Neill, a 68-year-old writer and retired nurse in Brooklyn, N.Y., who, with her husband, Paul, has

gone on several trips with other couples in recent years.



Paul and Susan O'Neill, of Brooklyn, N.Y., have traveled to the Montreal International Jazz Festival with other couples several times. PHOTO: SUSAN O'NEILL

On a group vacation to the Montreal International Jazz Festival, Ms. O'Neill recalls, personalities clashed. One evening, when the group was debating whether to add a concert at the last minute, one participant “kind of threw a tantrum,” she says. “She just wanted it to be settled and done and neatly packaged, and it wasn’t.”

When traveling with a group of friends, it can help to have a ringleader. A benevolent dictator, even. If you try to plan a trip with a large group democratically, you’ll likely end up staying home.

When Larry Leff and his friend Paul Sendik decided to plan a trip to California with their wives and four other couples, the two men picked a Napa Valley hotel, booked tours at wineries and made restaurant reservations. Only after making these decisions did they send an email with the detailed itinerary to their friends. “We felt that this was going to be a lot easier to do it this way instead of having 10 different conversations,” says Mr. Leff, a 49-year-old father of two from Dix Hills, N.Y., who works in the financial industry. The strategy worked. “Everyone said great,” Mr. Leff says.

Travel groups staying in a rental house or villa encounter problems they wouldn’t find in a hotel. Bedrooms are often widely different in size and appeal. One couple always seems to get stuck with the dreaded bunk bedroom.



Larry Leff (back row, far left) and Paul Sendik (back row, far right) put together their California trip itinerary, which included several winery visits, for themselves, their wives and friends. *PHOTO: MELISA NOVICK*

David Herrin and his husband, Carl Deo, have booked a rental house in Provincetown, Mass., for themselves and eight friends for an August vacation. The couple, who live in Los Angeles, will be arriving a few days late and took steps so they wouldn't end up with the worst room. "We kindly requested that our housemates reserve a specific room for us, because we are the ones who found the house and the ones who put up the security deposit," says Mr. Herrin, 45, who runs a research department at a talent agency. "It is a little more private and a touch larger, I think."

Mr. Herrin recalls a vacation about a decade ago when he wasn't so lucky. He ended up in an attic room with a steeply sloped ceiling. He had to climb a ladder to get to it.

The question of who cooks and who cleans can lead to conflict, too. When Anne Morgan Scully, president of McCabe World Travel, books villas in Europe or the Caribbean for groups of friends, she encourages them to hire a cook to prepare breakfast and dinner and to do the dishes afterward. For a group of eight, the cost can be as little as \$50 a person per day, she says. And no one has to feel like a scullery maid on the vacation.

Travel with friends can be particularly tricky when people have different financial resources. Ms. Richards Donohoe, who booked her Maine birthday trip through Backroads, which specializes in guided biking and hiking tours, says a few of the women spent a night or two in a hotel with the group, but skipped the biking trip to cut costs. When Mr. Herrin rents a house in Palm Springs each year with another group of friends, they use the app Splitwise, which tracks how much everyone spends, to make sure no one is footing too much of the bill.

Many tour operators do a lot of business running group trips that are open for anyone to book, but are now launching or expanding private trips for groups of friends and family members. "That generation under 50 or 40 doesn't really want to go with a group" they don't know, says Brad Crockett, director of private travel at Butterfield &

Robinson, a Toronto company that runs tours such as a six-day biking trip on the Costa Brava in Spain and a week-long hiking trip in Peru.

Butterfield & Robinson has made adjustments to appeal to travelers who want to keep their own schedule and be with their own friends, but who also still want the hand-holding of a tour with arranged hotels, meals and excursions. The company has offered customized trips for private groups for 15 years, but for a group of six, for example, they run about \$1,000 to \$1,500 a person per day.

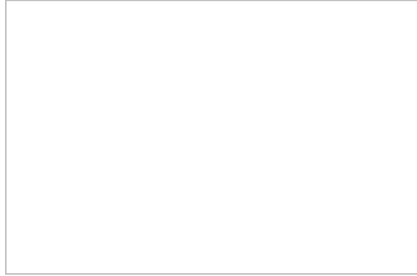
In 2012, Butterfield & Robinson launched so-called ready-to-book private trips, where families and groups of friends choose a preplanned itinerary. For a group of six, these run about \$750 to \$1,000 a person per day, not much more expensive than a traditional scheduled public-group trip.

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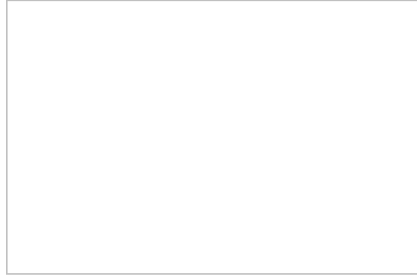
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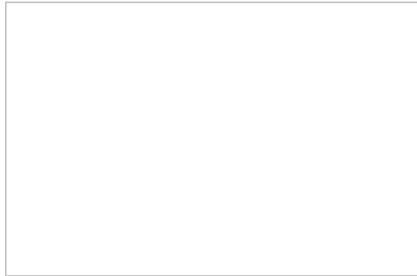
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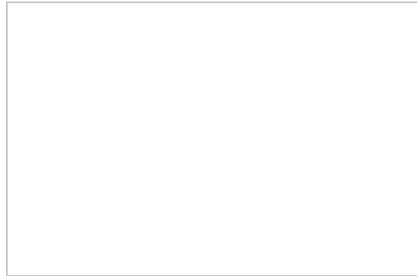
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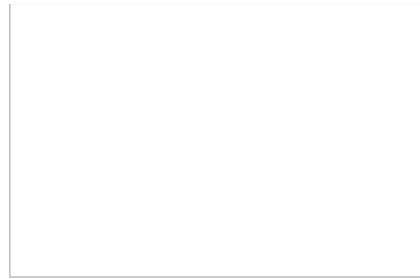
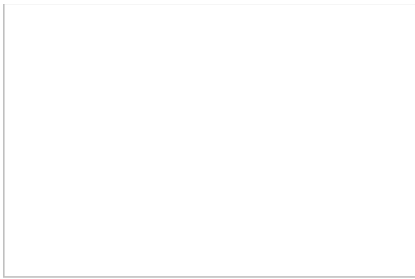
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