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## It's My Party and We'll Fly If I Want To

More travelers are choosing to mark their milestone birthdays and anniversaries far from home, inviting all their friends along for a blowout trip. A guide to the 'celebration vacation'

BY KEITH BLANCHARD

**A**S A KID looking up from the bottom of the hill, I always assumed the fun of birthdays would decline with age. Ten years old was surely the peak, or possibly 20—it seemed fairly obvious that turning 30, then 40, and so on, would gradually get worse, each “milestone” a millstone of increasing bulk, hung about your neck and stooping your back until the accumulated weight tumbled you into your grave at last.

Yeah...about that.

I turned 50 this year, and a deeper truth is becoming apparent. For all the tolls that age exacts—the eye-squint wrinkles, the lower back pain, the nagging mystery that is Iggy Azalea—there are compensatory gains. Example:

If I'm in a conversation that's boring me, I no longer have to sit and nod politely, as I did at 45. I can just walk away! It'll be chalked up to eccentricity. Or not; who cares.

If getting older is supposed to make us increasingly depressed, we never got the memo. (Or we couldn't read the tiny type). Turns out we grow about 5% happier with each decade we've lived, according to a University of Chicago study,

and a lot of people my age are starting to indulge that happiness by traveling ambitiously, with friends and family, for big milestone birthdays or anniversaries.

A full 75% of adults 45 and over have taken, or plan to take, one of these “celebration vacations,” according to AARP research released this year. At the same time, luxury-travel agents and tour operators report fielding more requests from

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## ADDING MILES TO THE MILESTONES

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clients looking to arrange these traveling parties, borrowing a page from destination weddings. “It's a very different and very personal way to celebrate with friends and family,” said Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell, co-owner of London-based bespoke travel company Cazenove + Loyd. Whether it's a three-day or weeklong trip, he added, “you have quality time with everyone, which would not be possible in a one-night event.” For those of a certain age, who have learned to hate gifts and truly value people, it's easy enough to understand the appeal.

I attended my first such milestone getaway about two years ago. We were five couples, originally from New Jersey, with a few of us sneaking up on age 50, and we hatched a scheme to take a week-long, pull-out-all-the-stops vacation together to Napa Valley. Two of the birthday girls, Ginny Icart and Susan Fallon, did the planning. “We printed out a big map of Napa and grabbed some markers and just went to town,” Ginny recalled recently. “Calling wineries about private tastings, poring over restaurant reviews, literally mapping everything.” They used another New Jersey friend and travel consultant, Laura Contri, to lock in a few logistics like finding the right hotel (the Vintage Inn, in Yountville) and booking a glorious monstrosity called a VIP Sprinter Limo with a driver (through Beau Wine Tours & Limousine Service) to shuttle us liquorheads around in style.

The itinerary lived up to the hype, and we had enormously good fun, hopping between private tasting rooms at wineries like Girard and Nickel & Nickel and the lovely garden of PlumpJack, and drinking \$80 wine from the bottle in the limo between stops. A once-in-a-decade event means no compromise, and so

we graced only the finest area restaurants with our overly loud and slightly wobbly presence: places like Redd, Gott's Roadside, Bouchon Bakery and Brix, with its outdoor brunch smorgasbord. By our final night of decadence—dinner at Press, starting with assorted specialty bacon—we were deliriously saturated with the excess.

And good thing, too, because we could never again afford to leave our houses. That trip cost thousands of dollars even *before* we started gifting ourselves thoughtful cases of Merlot and Cab from every tasting-room we stumbled into. (To draw down the debt, my wife, Leslie, and I agreed not to buy each other presents, Christmas or otherwise, for two years.) But that's the price of all-in indulgence: Make that once-every-10-years experience optimally satisfying, at any cost, and use the decade in between to pay the bill.

On my return from Napa, I began to see we weren't the only ones out there milking our milestones. In fact, some particularly gregarious individuals are becoming regulars on the destination-birthday circuit. Like Kim Cleaves, a corporate recruiter in Chatham, N.J., who this year alone has traveled to Jamaica, Bermuda and St. Bart's for these events. For the Jamaica trip, to celebrate Ms. Cleaves's own 50th, she booked a six-bedroom villa at Half Moon resort for herself and 15 friends. “I wanted to go where we could all be in one place—not in separate hotels—at an affordable cost per person,” said Ms. Cleaves, whose guests knew her well but not one another. “These people who had all impacted my life in different ways were all hanging out together, laughing and talking. It was truly amazing.”

For his 50th celebration, Dave

Smith, a friend of mine from Canada, had no interest in sitting on a beach:

He wanted to ride hard over the hill, joining five Harley-loving buddies from high school on a motorcycle tour of Italy, a trip that's long topped his bucket list. Two of the friends were native Italians and organized the trip locally, procuring exactly the right hog to suit each rider's preference and choosing inexpensive hotels and restaurants. From a kick-start in Florence, they spent 16 days riding through Rome and on south to Naples, winding along the steep cliffs of the Amalfi Coast to Salerno, then all the way up along the Adriatic Sea, into Bologna and even the tunnels of the Swiss Alps before circling back to Florence. “Everywhere you looked, it was like a scene out of ‘Gladiator,’” Dave said—music to my jealous ears.

Another group of friends, four golfing zealots, chose a tamer and much pricier do-before-you-die trip to mark their 50ths: Scotland. “We played Turnberry, Carnoustie, Kingsbarns and the Old Course at St Andrews—four of the most famous courses in the world,” said Roddy McRae, one of the celebrants. “We played 36 holes a day, so we'd try to play one iconic place and one not-so-iconic each day—if you had bad weather or just wanted to skip one, you could.” The Old Course was the hardest one to pin down, mainly because every golfer in the world wants to tee off there. Though there's a lottery system if you feel lucky, the boys—committed to maximal enjoyment and minimal hassle—worked with a tour operator, paying a premium to be guaranteed a spot. “Everything was taken care of: tee times, hotels, even transportation. A father/daughter team drove us around every

day," Mr. McRae remembered fondly.


Aside from sorting out the logistics, professional travel planners can help you go happily over the top with a celebration vacation—the adult equivalent of “my kid’s bar mitzvah is gonna make your kid’s bar mitzvah look like a lemonade stand.” Cazenove + Loyd, for example, organizes four to five elaborate birthday trips a year through its Dreamsmith “celebration” division, specializing in customized events in South America, Africa and Asia. One of the most memorable far-flung fêtes, noted Mr. Wilmot-Sitwell, was a 65th birthday party for a British client, with about 80 guests, held over four days in Rajasthan. “We took over the entire Samode Palace outside Jaipur, and organized dinners, music, fireworks and activities,” said Mr. Wilmot-Sitwell. One day they set up a tuk tuk race in the desert, complete with prizes.

But you can always—always, apparently—go bigger. Neill Ghosh, director of sales and service at Original Travel, another London-based luxury outfitter, recalled one client who wanted to charter the entire Venice Simplon-Orient-Express to take some 150 friends from London to Venice, ending with a masked ball at the Hotel Cipriani to commemorate his anniversary. But in the end, said Mr. Ghosh, they realized “while it sounds fun, it is hard to have a really good party on a train as you can’t all fit in one carriage,” so he booked a \$650,000 trip to India instead. Other deep-pocketed revelers, said Mr. Ghosh, often opt for private islands, boat charters or tented safaris for their festivities—“places they don’t have to share.” For those of us who lack an inheritance to squander on a private island, Marisol Mosquera, founder of the Lima-based Aracari travel company—who has organized many a destination event—has some sound and simple advice: “Just put a

party in a cool place and give your guests a sense of what there is to do at the destination.” She encourages the host to resist over-planning and relinquish some control. “Remember your guests are on holiday and may not want to be stuck with a mandatory schedule,” said Ms. Mosquera.

As for me, I skipped celebrating “The Big One” this time around: My wife and I went way over the top with pricey parties for our 40th birthdays, so we decided to take it easy at 50. But I’ve gotten a huge head start on planning for my soon-to-be-legendary 60th. I’m pondering Mars as a destination: with robot bartenders, drone-dropped hors d’oeuvres and a brilliant night of back-from-the-grave hologram performances called “Live from Rock ‘n’ Roll Heaven.” Trust me—you will not want to miss it.


My friend Dave wanted to ride hard over the hill, so he crossed Italy on a Harley.



Guests of Hacienda Bambusa hang together after a hike in Colombia’s Cocora Valley.



Kim Cleaves (in hat) and friends from Fairfield University’s class of ‘88 all celebrate turning 50, on a sailboat in Bermuda.



A long table of guests assemble at Samode Palace near Jaipur for one of the meals at a 4-day birthday party.