

# Themed Vacations

Giving your holiday a purpose



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IT USED TO be that everyone would dream of that once-in-a-lifetime vacation - a European cruise, a Hawaiian holiday, a week in Paris. But now that flights have gotten cheaper and people are traveling more, those bucket list holidays are prone to losing a bit of their magical luster. Luxury properties with similar amenities start merging together in a hazy combination of glitzy lobbies, ornate dinners and marble bathrooms.

Enter the themed vacation - a holiday built around a hobby, destination or event, the perennial classic being the beach vacation. And while I've been guilty of spending an entire week at an all-inclusive beach resort with nothing but a limitless supply of piña colodas and an armload of trashy paperbacks against a backdrop of crystal clear Caribbean waters, I can't really say those types of holidays have been particularly memorable.

Last week, I made a holiday centered around one of my great passions - tennis. I spent the entire week at the Thailand Open tennis tournament which was the anchor for my working vacation, but made sure to hit some great shopping venues (Bangkok's Platinum Mall is still my favorite place for quirky, inexpensive clothes), awesome Thai food (I'm still partial to street food and keep wondering why Vietnam hasn't adopted the universally loved grilled meat skewers with sticky rice combo) and a couple of movies in Bangkok's plush theaters. After all, man does not live on tennis alone.

The travel industry has really adopted the themed vacation. While *Star Trek*- and *The Sound of Music*-inspired itineraries are still popular, updates for the 2000s have included Downton Abbey holidays, complete with visits to Highclere Castle, home of the Crawleys, and the village in Oxfordshire used in the making of the TV series.

Themed cruises are also popular, both for on- and off-shore activities, like hitting golf courses at every port to hobnobbing with your favorite celebrities. A themed cruise earlier this year that sounded fun was the *Top Chef* Cruise - five days with your favorite judges and contestants, amidst quick-fire challenges, cooking demonstrations and private classes.

You'd be surprised how niche these themed cruises can be. Take Royal

Caribbean's Barbie Premium Experience, complete with pink room décor, a "Tiara and Teacups" party and a Mermaid Dance class for girls age 4 to 11. Or the Fred. Olsen Espionage cruise, hosted by a Cold War specialist. Or if 80s boy bands are more your thing, there's always the annual "New Kids on the Block Cruise," which apparently sold out in about an hour this year. (Not to worry, there's always 2014 where organizers promise: "TWO FULL days trapped at sea with NKOTB on the ship - DAY & NIGHT THEMED DECK PARTIES. MORE FACE TIME.")

## Feet Firmly on the Ground

For landlubbers in Asia, a themed vacation could be anything from elephants in Thailand (visiting elephant camps from Chiang Mai in the north down to Koh Chang in the south) to Vietnamese food (organizing street food tours or cooking classes in each region).

A few years ago, I took a photography-centered vacation to Africa. It was the perfect combination of glamping, animals and photography workshops - three of my favorite activities. And I walked away from the two month trip with a new skill as a bonus.

Because themed holidays are on the rise, you can always find travel specialists who will help plan your perfect holiday. These

agents can be really useful, not only to custom-assemble elements of your trip, but can sometimes even use inside contacts to secure once-in-a-lifetime opportunities like visiting sites which are normally off-limits (think Nefertari's Tomb for the budding Egyptologist). Table tennis fans might like to play for an hour against a Chinese Olympic champion and traveling socialites can rub elbows with the glitterati at an Indian prince's birthday bash - all truly unforgettable experiences.

For me, though, part of the joy of travel is in the planning which I can get pretty obsessive over. Themed vacations usually require more research than the average holiday, as they tend to have a lot of moving parts as well as off-the-beaten-path requirements. For an upcoming trip to Tokyo (not my first time), I decided on the theme of Old and New. It's made planning all the more fun, as I'm looking into cycling to Tsukuda-Jima, an old fishermen's island, and perhaps staying in a *ryokan* (a traditional Japanese inn) as well as checking out the crazy kids of Harajuku and the geeks of Akihabara. And there may or may not be a robot restaurant involved.

For your next holiday, why not choose a theme and plan around it? It may just be one of the most memorable vacations you've ever had! ■

