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Making the House Party a Movable Feast

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SOME husbands, if they remember, present their wives with a gift made of tin or aluminum on their 10th anniversary. Not Jeffrey Dishner. Instead, the chief operating officer of the Starwood Capital Group plotted — with the help of Homebase Abroad, a luxury villa company that specializes in Italy — to arrange a week in Tuscany last year as a surprise for his wife, Cathy, to be shared with more than two dozen friends and family members.

“I thought we were going to the Amalfi Coast on our own,” said Mrs. Dishner.

“My husband told me we had to stop by the Tuscan home of a business associate for cocktails. We drove up this long driveway to this truly stunning villa.

Then we were led around a corner to a pool and terrace filled with 28 of our closest friends all holding glasses of champagne. It was overwhelming,” she said.

That evening, Mrs. Dishner recalled, the group dined outside at a long table while a band played. Afterward, there was a private fireworks display. “It was the most romantic and incredible atmosphere and a night I’ll never forget,” she said.

The Dishners are not the only Americans choosing to celebrate meaningful occasions away from home at an exciting foreign locale. Not far behind the recent boom of destination weddings, is the increasing popularity of celebrations for events like anniversaries and birthdays.

“Europeans have been fans of the house party for decades, but only in recent years have Americans embraced the tradition of gathering a group of friends under one roof for a celebration,” said Melissa Biggs Bradley, the former editor in chief of

Town & Country Travel magazine, and the founder of Indagare (www.indagare.com), a luxury travel Web site started late last month.

“It really became noticeable last year,” said Mara Solomon, director of Homebase Abroad. “This year it’s just become huge. I would say in 2007 maybe 10 percent of our trips are birthday celebrations — a lot of 40ths, 50ths and 60ths. I think it has a lot to do with the baby boomers coming of age.”

Ms. Solomon said one of the company’s upcoming trips was 40th birthday celebration in Tuscany, where a week-long series of events was planned, including a balloon ride at sunrise, cooking classes and a “a masquerade ball where each guest will be assigned a medieval identity and be made up by a team of costumers and makeup people.”

The year before he turned 40, Anthony Chaumont, the owner of a furniture import company in Texas, told friends that for his landmark birthday he planned to give away many of his possessions, go to a Buddhist monastery in northern Thailand and shave his head. Instead, he and his wife, Kim, organized a weeklong party for 22 friends and family members that began with a cruise on a Chinese junk in Hong Kong and continued later in the week to an all-night celebration at a Balinese seaside villa with the honoree cast as Hugh Hefner.

The Bali party was arranged by Elite Events (www.EliteEventsBali.com), the party organizing division of Elite Havens, a villa rental company based in Bali. “They made me a satin robe, they designed my wife’s outfit, brought in all these pink frangipani flowers, a huge blow-up bunny and disco ball, arranged the food, hired the entertainment and decorated the lawn,” Mr. Chaumont said. The entertainment, he added, included plenty of “bunnies,” fire jugglers and a drag queen.

Ian Macaulay, a partner of Elite Havens, said the company had received so many destination celebration requests in recent years that it decided to start Elite Events to handle the business. Although the company already represents many party-ready villas, like the five-bedroom Atas Ombak villa that the Chaumonts used, Elite Havens is now developing Pantai Selatan Estate (www.pantaiselatanestate.com), a complex of seven large villas.

Other popular locations for destination parties include the Spanish island of Ibiza, the Caribbean (specifically, St Barts, Jamaica and Anguilla), Miami and Hawaii.

Serena Cook, founder of the upscale concierge service Deliciously Sorted Ibiza, said she already had bookings for a 21st birthday party, a 30th, two 40ths and a 60th this summer. “Here you can have big outdoor parties on the beach with world-class D.J.’s. Anything goes on Ibiza.”

Stiles Bennet, director of marketing of Wimco, a villa-rental company, said that the appeal St. Barts was its glamour factor and a concentration of extraordinary villas and top-notch restaurants.

The villa rental company LaCure, offers properties in the Caribbean, Europe, Central America and elsewhere. One of its Caribbean villas is the 5,000-squarefoot Roaring Pavilion Villa & Spa in Jamaica, which has an on-site spa with a fulltime attendant. The villa’s beach is known as James Bond Beach because it was the location for a classic scene from “Dr. No,” in which Sean Connery greeted Ursula Andress as she emerged from the surf.

Destination celebrations aren’t restricted to fantasy villas. For the 40th birthday of his wife, Lauren, Leonard Stern, a partner in a marketing, advertising and public relations firm, organized a 10-day tour of northern Spain for 14 of their best friends.

“My wife speaks fluent Spanish and has always had a passion for Spain but had never been there,” he said. A Madrid-based travel company, Made for Spain, helped Mr. Stern put together a series of events that started at a five-star inn on the Costa Brava, and included cooking lessons in Barcelona, dinner on the Rioja wine estate of a Spanish marquis and ended on

a private balcony overlooking the running of the bulls in Pamplona. To get the group around, Made for Spain provided a small bus along with a driver and guide.

According to Mr. Stern, the trip was a success, in part, because, “it’s so incredible to be able to have new adventures with the people you love. It doesn’t even really matter where you are, we could have been in a small hotel somewhere, but when you get to do it in a new and interesting place, it adds a really fun dimension to it. Not everyone has the time or means to do it, but it’s a wonderful way to reconnect with old friends and create new histories with them.”

Erik Torkells, editor-in-chief of Budget Travel magazine, agrees. “Anywhere is special with the right people,” he said, adding that clients should always try to cut a deal with service providers. “With numbers, you have leverage,” he said.

VISITOR INFORMATION

HomesAway (800-374-6637; www.homesaway.com) has properties in Spain, France, Italy, Scotland, and Croatia and will help organize any type of celebration. Its properties in Provence, France, start at \$6,600 to \$22,000 a week, depending on size and location. The largest can accommodate up to 28 guests.

Homebase Abroad (781-639-4040; www.homebaseabroad.com) specializes in opulent villas in Italy, specifically the areas of Tuscany, Umbria, Lake Como and the Amalfi Coast. A summer week in one of the company’s Tuscan villas starts at around \$10,000.

Elite Havens (62-361-731-074; www.elitehavensbali.com) The Atas Ombak villa, which has five bedrooms and includes a staff of more than 20, rents for \$2,000 a night during Bali’s high season.