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Grandmother treats family to luxurious trips

by Laura Layden



In 2012, Ann DeBruler gave her family the gift of an experience - a lavish European getaway.

"It was a Christmas gift. That's what it was," she said.

The trip to London and Paris, for a family of 18, included grandkids. The price tag? More than \$200,000, including the cost of business-class airfare and stays at five-star hotels.

"My husband and I have a philosophy that the best gift - or one of the best gifts we can give our children and grandchildren - is the gift of an experience," said DeBruler, a part-time Naples resident.

The septuagenarian turned to Claudia Gordon with Naples Luxury Travel to plan a memorable family trip with something for everyone.

The initial plan was just to go to London, but when one of the youngest grandchildren jumped up and down at the thought of seeing the Eiffel Tower, not realizing it was in another country, the winter escape grew to include Paris.

For Gordon, it was one of the more spectacular itineraries she's put together for the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

The DeBrulers and family flew to London before Christmas, where they stayed a few nights at the historic Goring Hotel, near Buckingham Palace.

Ann and her husband, Bill, slept in the opulent two-bedroom Royal Suite, along with their daughter and son-in-law. It's the hotel's most requested room (Kate Middleton stayed in it the night before her marriage to Prince William). The spacious suite runs the length of the hotel's top floor, opening up to a private balcony overlooking The Goring Gardens. It comes with a footman and many other perks from a stocked bar to personalized bathrobes. The cost for such luxury is steep, running more than \$10,000 a night.

On Christmas Day, the family attended Mass at the Westminster Abbey. They all dressed to the hilt, which didn't make the grandsons - who wore coats and ties - too happy, especially when they arrived at church to find so many others in casual clothes.

"One of the grandsons turned to me at some point and said, 'Grandma, are we

overdressed?" DeBruler recalls. "I said, 'No, they are underdressed.'"

The family ate a scrumptious brunch served in the dining room of the Royal Suite. The suite was a popular gathering spot.

"During the day the grandkids would come and have iPad parties," DeBruler said.

Before New Year's the family hopped on the high-speed Eurostar to reach Paris, where they stayed at the Hotel Le Bristol for a few nights. The elegant 18th-century palace isn't just luxurious, it's considered a "leading bastion of gastronomy." Nightly rates can run upwards of \$1,000.

On New Year's Eve the family dined at the Eiffel Tower, where they had a front row seat to a stunning fireworks show.

Other highlights of the trip included a sightseeing tour on the Thames River in London and a behind-the-scenes walking tour of the studio where crews filmed the Harry Potter movies in Leavesden.

Then there was the famed afternoon tea at the Ritz.

"I do have to tell you the grandsons are not real crazy about cucumber sandwiches with the crust cut off," DeBruler said. "That didn't go over too well."

Other stops included visits to the Louvre museum and Versailles Gardens in Paris. The family traveled by bus and used tour guides to get around in London and Paris.

Though costly, the more than week-long getaway was priceless for the family, Gordon said.

"Traveling with your cousins, how fun is that? And your mom and dad and grandparents too," she said.

The visit to the Eiffel Tower was one of the most memorable experiences for the grandkids, who still talk about it in wonder and awe. One of youngest once described it as the highlight of her life.

"I think it still is. I think it could be for anybody," DeBruler said.

More family memories have been made since then. In the summer of last year, Ann and Bill took their family on two safaris in South Africa, again turning to Gordon to plan their trip. By then the family had grown to 21, with the addition of three grandchildren who came along with their son's marriage.

"None of us had been to South Africa,"



The Debrulers pose for a group photo after having tea at the Ritz Hotel in London during the family's overseas vacation.

DeBruler said. "It was amazing."

Before the trip, a few of the grandchildren were nervous to go, but they warmed up to the idea.

DeBruler had some must-sees including a trip to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela spent 18 of his 27 years in prison. The family's tour guide, who was imprisoned there for 16 years, shared how he waited for a visit from his dad one Father's Day while locked up, only to find out he'd been shot eight times and killed. The youngest grandchild sobbed over the story.

"I'm so glad that I made them all do it," DeBruler said. "I just think they have more of an awareness of things."

Though she'd love to take another big trip with the family,

DeBruler has nothing planned. Her grandkids have a few suggestions of future places to visit, from Australia to Italy.

"There's nothing like spoiling the grandchildren," DeBruler said. "They'll remember it forever. It's not that I want them to remember that we gave it to them, it's just I want them to remember the experiences - and they do."



Several children in the Debruler family pose for a photo in the dining room of the Queen's Yacht while the family traveled along the Thames River.