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Big spring break group? Try renting a house

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Enlarge By Wendy Flint, AP Photo

Vacation homes can be a great alternative to large, impersonal resorts, especially for big groups or those who prefer a home-away-from-home setting.

By Traci Carl, Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO, Mexico — My cousin booked an amazing wedding at the adventure resort Costa Azul, in the tiny Mexican village of San Francisco about a half hour north of Puerto Vallarta.

The town was perfect: Cobblestone streets, a beach known for its surfing, turtle releases at sunset.

There was only one catch: Costa Azul wasn't a big resort and it was booked solid within hours of her save-the-date e-mail. For guests still looking for a place to stay, there were only a couple other small hotel options in town and they were rapidly filling up.

WEB WATCH: Find the perfect vacation rental

Costa Azul suggested renting one of the town's many beach houses, so I turned to the website vrbo.com and quickly found a four-bedroom that could easily fit my family, my sister's family, my mom and two more cousins.

It was the perfect option. With a full kitchen, our meals weren't subject to the whim of the hotel restaurant, especially when it came to the demands of two toddlers who preferred boxed mac-and-cheese over fish tacos.

Everyone had their own room and bathroom. No bunking up. No fighting over who got to shower first before the wedding.

And, with a full house, it turned out to be a cheaper and more flexible option than most hotels.

We could hang out with the wedding guests at Costa Azul's pool, or wander home and relax with homemade margaritas on our rooftop terrace overlooking the ocean.

As spring break approaches, vacation homes can be a great alternative to large, impersonal resorts, especially for big groups or those who prefer a home-away-from-home setting.

But it may not be the right choice for vacationers who want to be spoiled. There are no waiters prowling poolside, waiting to take your food and drink order and bring it to you directly. Maid service may only be once or twice a week. And you can't dial reception and have them book a massage for you later in the afternoon at the in-house spa.

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But there are definite advantages, especially for:

•**Big groups:** Everyone can easily stay in the same place, and it is usually cheaper than a hotel, both in terms of nightly rates and food. If you don't feel like cooking, some houses recommend local people who will come and cook for you — for a small fee that is still usually far cheaper than eating out. For large families, vacation homes can be a great alternative to squeezing into the same hotel room together or sending your kids to an adjoining room where it's hard to keep an eye on them. It's a great option for church or school groups planning ski or beach adventures.

•**The home-away-from-home crowd:** Do you have special dietary needs, or maybe you're just an early riser who grows impatient waiting for the hotel kitchen to set up brunch? Or do you want to spend a month this winter living somewhere warm but can't afford a second home? A vacation rental gives you a chance to set up a home-away-from-home. Our Mexican beach house not only had a full kitchen, but books, games and DVDs.

•**The off-the-beaten-path crowd:** Don't want the resort to dictate your vacation? Instead of having the amenities right outside your door, you can explore and find your own entertainment, restaurants and spas. If you find yourself really missing the hotel life, most resorts will let you drop in for the day and use their facilities, as long as you spend

a minimum amount on food and drink. Many vacation rentals also include insider tips on local sites. The owners of our rental home in Mexico, Americans Bill and Wendy Flint, sent us an e-mail with pages of great local advice, including good restaurants, recommended day trips, and even what to expect in terms of pesos versus dollars.

•Gotta dog?: Vacation home rentals often accept dogs and cats, for those who want to bring the family pet along. Just double-check that the listing is "pet friendly." That can be invaluable, especially overseas. While a growing number of U.S. hotels will accept pets, most resorts in Mexico won't allow them. But make sure to check legal requirements at your destination before bringing pets. Mexico, Canada and even Hawaii all have different regulations on proof of vaccinations for dogs and other requirements.

You don't have to go to the beach to enjoy rental homes. You can find them almost anywhere. In Mexico alone, you can rent a penthouse apartment in Mexico City's historic center or stay at a house from the colonial area in the quaint town of San Miguel de Allende.

Here are some tips for finding the right house and what to expect.

•How to find a house: [Vrbo.com](#) is a wonderful site with more than 110,000 homes all over the world. You rent directly from the owners.

•Be prepared to pay in advance: Many homes will require full payment ahead of your stay, and there's a good chance you won't be able to use your credit card. Ask for a contract, and be sure to get a receipt or some other kind of documentation for your payments. Make sure you know whether you can get a refund in case you have to cancel.

•Transportation and food: Rental homes can be off the beaten path, so be sure to ask whether you need to rent a car or whether there are local options like taxi services. Also find out whether grocery stores, restaurants, gas stations and local recreation areas like beaches are within walking distance or if they require a car. If you want to cook at home, some rentals will offer to have a local contact stock your fridge and cupboards before you arrive, for a fee. Otherwise, your first stop after arriving at the airport should probably be the grocery store.

•Other: Make sure the owners have someone available locally for you to call if you need help with a burst pipe, a dishwasher you can't figure out or overflowing garbage bins. If you have small children or folks in your group with mobility issues, ask about the layout and any stairs on the property. You may also want to ask about security for the home and the neighborhood. And if you can't live without e-mail, find out whether Internet service is included or is available nearby at a cafe or library.

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