

VACATION ADVENTURES IN CAPE MAY

TEXT & PHOTOS BY JOEL SAMBERG

This is a story of great expectations.

And since Charles Dickens has already entered the narrative with a reference to one of his most famous novels, it's worth noting this is also a tale of two cities.

Well, five, actually.

Cape May, of course, is the star. That's where 17 people, all part of an extended family, rented a house for a week this summer to relax, have fun in the sun, and get to know each other a little better. The other towns involved, from which all 17 hail, are Brooklyn; Jamestown (in upstate New York); and three in Connecticut—Avon, Milford, and Newington.

At this early juncture in the scenario, it's too hard to resist sharing another Dickensian reference simply because there were some hard times during the week. But all in all, most of us got what we wanted out of the experiment. For me that included a Messy Bessy at Hot Dog Tommy's.

None of us was new to Cape May. We've all been there before—at B&Bs, hotels, even other rented houses. But this was the first time this particular group got together in a house the size of the concrete ship that's still sinking off the coast of Sunset Beach.

In addition to my wife Bonnie and me, the group included our three grown children, their significant others, four grandchildren under the age of nine, the parents of one son-in-law, that

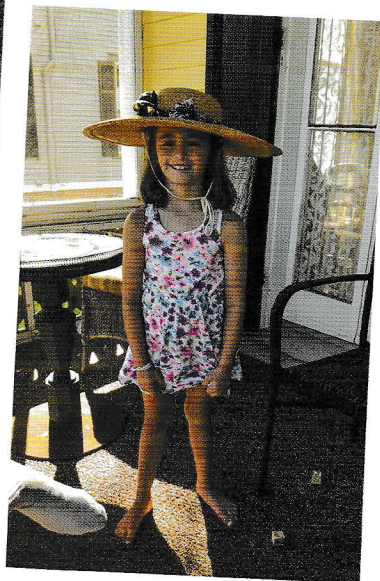
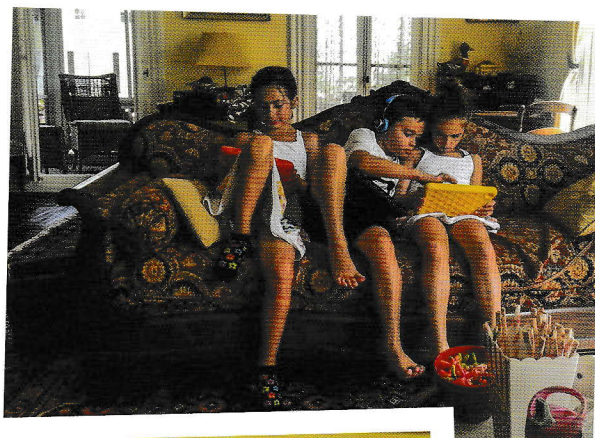
son-in-law's sister, her husband and their 11-year-old son. We took up residence at Franny's Folly for the last week of June, a three-story Victorian behind Congress Hall, a block from the promenade. It's a house with majesty, porches galore, beautiful gardens—and maybe even a ghost.

The owner, George, was very nice to deal with. We signed his renter's contract last fall, paid in full by spring, gladly provided a \$2,000 security deposit against breakage, loss of household items, and excessive messiness—and crossed our collective fingers. (After all, as noted there were three kids under age nine!)

I'm actually not sure how big that old concrete ship was before it (mostly) sank—but I do know that in Franny's Folly, you could go an entire day without seeing a family member, even if you were desperately looking for him. "It's like an abyss in here," noted Aaron, the brother-in-law from Jamestown, when he was searching for his wife and son to go to the beach.

The age of the house did provide its challenges. For example, the wood-framed screen door at the back of house, the one we used most often (that's where six cars and 11 beach chairs were kept) stuck every time I tried to open it. I didn't come to Cape May to curse, but found myself living in a David Mamet play without ever auditioning.

There were three central air conditioning zones



to cool the house. The bottom zone, with its own thermostat, included the dining room on the main floor and the kitchen in the basement. At the end of the first day I turned off that thermostat thinking that everyone was in bed. Then I went to the kitchen to get a drink. Several family members were still down there chatting, and it seemed as if they were likely to stay awhile. So I went back to the living room to turn the thermostat back on. But it was already on! I won't swear there's a ghost in the house, but I won't rule it out, either.

It's important to get a good night's sleep after a full day of activity. When you're living in someone else's house, you have to try to do that in someone else's bed. I'm pleased to report that everyone was comfortable—although why the four oldest people in the group ended up having to climb the most stairs to go to sleep is one of those mysteries that even Sherlock Holmes wouldn't be able to solve. Incidentally, there was a play about Sherlock Holmes being performed in Cape May that week.

And then there was the bathroom situation: 17 people and only four bathrooms on the bedroom floors. Talk about adventure!

One of the perks of renting a house is that you don't have to go to restaurants all the time. That saves a lot of money. Bonnie and I had about a third of our meals at such venues as Fins, Dock Mike's, the Mad Batter and others, and the rest we prepared ourselves in the kitchen and ate in the outdoor gazebo. The plan was that anyone who wanted to volunteer to make a meal for the entire household could do so if they wished, but that no one was obligated. As it turned out, the entire household never ate together, not because we were getting on each other's nerves (we weren't), but because several had special requisites of which our in-house volunteers were unaware.

My son Dan and his partner Justin spent hours one day preparing a fabulous eggplant dinner that was so abundant that I had leftovers to bring back to Connecticut, along with three extra pounds. Twelve of us gathered in the dining room that evening, with its massive mile-long table, and had one of the best meals of the week. If the ghost was still there, he didn't make himself known—although the wine did suspi-



ciously disappear quicker than humans can empty a bottle.

My daughter Kate, who watched her own daughter, 20-month-old Ella, fare quite well in new surroundings, also got to play with children five times Ella's age—a nice break for a new mother. At one point Kate played hide-and-seek in the gigantic house with her two nieces and nephew, marveling at how well Jill was able to hide almost anywhere, being small for her age. “Don’t worry, Aunt Kate,” Jill assured her. “Maybe one day you’ll get shorter so you can be a better hider.”

IN MANY WAYS IT WAS A VACATION OF NUMBERS:

- Three of us got seriously sunburned early in the week.
- Ten of us drove to the Cape May Zoo only to get stuck in gridlock by the entrance, compelling us to turn around and go back to the house.
- One child had to be disciplined.
- Five went bike riding daily, including my granddaughter Veronica, who as an 8-year-old has more common sense on two wheels than some people twice her age.
- Eleven went to see the sunset at Sunset Beach, which was lovely, although we missed the distinguished veteran

flag-lowering ceremony by ten minutes.

- Five of us played miniature golf. (That’s where the discipline came in!)
- And one took care of plants and flowers, even though no one asked her to.

That’s right. Bonnie is physically incapable of passing a deceased flower without removing the head from the stem, or ignoring a plant whose leaves are wilting without giving it liquid sustenance. Nowhere in the contract we signed with George does it say “Tenants must deadhead and water all fatigued flora,” yet there she was, with Franny’s Folly hoses and Franny’s Folly watering cans, walking around the lovely grounds of the house as if she were a hired landscape specialist. Kate and my other daughter, Celia, as much as they wanted to have a relaxing time with their own families, also wanted their mother to enjoy herself and begged her to stop. What the girls didn’t realize is that deadheading and watering makes Bonnie happy (even though she can do it in Connecticut without having to pay for the privilege).

While Bonnie was deadheading and watering, the rest of us were inside looking for a television remote that went missing



on the second day. It had been in the basement playroom, where all the children had gathered several times a day. I had already accepted the notion that George would keep a portion of the security deposit to cover the missing device. Theories were rampant: a kid mindlessly put

it in the kitchen garbage thinking it was a rotten vegetable; an adult inadvertently put it in a suitcase thinking it had stowed away from home; the living room ghost took it to watch a Patrick Swayze movie...

Bonnie and I escaped one day to go to Cold Spring Village, which is something we had been hoping to do for years, but had never gotten around to. At one point we were 'yelled at' in a one-room schoolhouse by a costumed actor

performing the part of a strict 19th-century teacher. We discovered that he was appearing in that Sherlock Holmes play, but I didn't have the guts to ask him to solve the mystery of why I had to climb 35 steps just to go to sleep. He probably would've yelled even more. (When I noticed that the 19th-century schoolhouse had no bathroom at all, I decided not to complain about Franny's Folly anymore, and instead I counted my blessings.)

In addition to relaxing, some of us accomplished a few personal tasks. Celia's husband Dave, a trumpet player with the Hartford Jazz Orchestra, practiced every day in the most beautiful surroundings without being bothered by anyone or anything. As for me, I worked in glorious solitude on several pages of a novel I'm writing that, if published and becomes a bestseller, may allow me to buy a house of my own in Cape May one day, where I'll definitely sleep on the ground floor. (I know, I know: keep dreaming.)

I also read a lot, including several *Esquire* and *Look* magazines from the 1960s that

George has stacked on bureaus throughout the house. Those were fascinating, particularly the advertisements, many of which today would be deemed sexist. They reminded me of the progress we have made as a society, which certainly made its way to Franny's Folly: There were no assigned gender roles. Everyone chipped in and had equal say in what to do and when and how to do it. Men cooked and cleaned, and women led search and rescue missions.

I'm talking about Celia here, who saved the day in the final hours of our adventure. "Dad! I have something serious to tell you!" she yelled when she finally made it to the top floor after running around the house looking for me. I thought she was going to tell me that someone had smashed into my car in the driveway. "I found the remote!" she gushed.

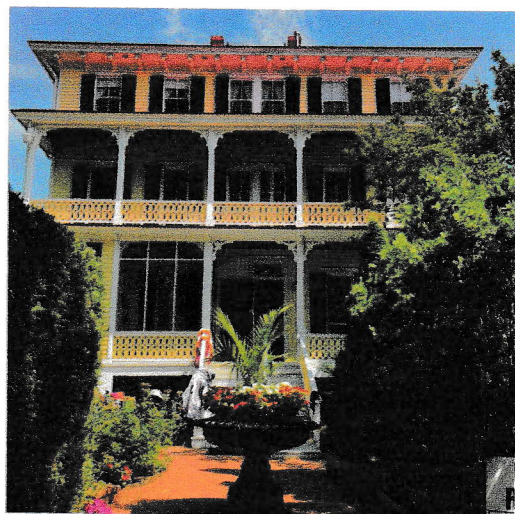
The remote had fallen into a hidden pocket behind a cushion on the playroom couch. And here's the kicker: she didn't find just that one remote, but another one just like it!

Were all expectations met? No. There was a bleak moment or two related to private family issues to which few in the group were privy (which is the way private family issues should remain). While there were some deep conversations, getting to know each other better didn't pan out as the major theme I initially had expected simply because of individual schedules and logistics. And one porch stood above three gigantic air-conditioning condensers making that porch louder than the Hartford Jazz Orchestra.

But still, Cape May tranquility is undeniable. How can you complain about living for a week in a comfortable bedroom with a view of the Atlantic, where dolphins pop out of the water to say hello? How can you grumble about not living by clocks and corporate protocols? After all, at home I'd spend the day in business shoes dealing with stuffed suits, but in Cape May I spent it in flip flops eating stuffed shrimp.

So, despite a rainy afternoon, a sticky door, and a malicious couch, when all was said and done, in true Dickensian fashion I decided to say to George,

"Please sir, can I have some more?" ■



The exterior of Franny's Folly