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The Next Big Thing in Luxury Travel: A Family Therapist

Wealthy parents are paying tens of thousands of dollars for a resort vacation with their children where they tackle family dynamics

By Sara Ashley O'Brien

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On a sprawling estate on New Zealand's Matakana Coast, there's an infinity pool, a heated spa, a secret wine cellar and a tennis court for vacationing guests. Another unusual luxury: on-site counseling.

Bluestone Families, which operates retreats on the estate, sees vacations as the future site for fostering healthy dynamics between parents and kids. In the digital age, where devices compete for attention at nearly every waking hour, Bluestone's founders believe raising children is harder than ever—including for the very wealthiest. For about \$80,000 (not including airfare), families can get all of the usual benefits of a far-flung trip, from delicious meals to adventurous outdoor activities, plus a professional therapist on hand.

Madeline Avery, 35, went on a five-night retreat in October 2024 with her husband, Jack, and their children, who are 8 and 5 years old. "I wanted to be connected now rather than trying to fix this when my kids are teenagers," she said. The Averys, who live in Australia and own a luxury yacht-charter company among other businesses, learned about Bluestone Families after Madeline stumbled upon the estate on Instagram.

"Because we go away so much and we go to so many amazing places, I was really worried about my kids becoming bratty, becoming overly privileged," Jack Avery, 37, said. Yes, their retreat was in a picturesque luxury setting. But between archery and kayaking, the parents worked on addressing their kids' frustrations, they all spent less time on their phones and the family started a new ritual of sharing "highs and lows" of the day at the dinner table.

"We got more in a week there than I have in three weeks in France," Jack Avery said.

Miraval Berkshires, an adults-only resort in Lenox, Mass., began including kids in a Family Connection Week last year, focused on mindfulness and family dynamics. According to general

manager Gilbert Santana, the concept was so successful—about 500 people attended the first event in April 2024—that it is planning its third in November. The cost is more than \$1,000 a night, per person.

Santana said it is helping children get on a “mindful journey early.” Together, families are taking part in cupcake or taco-building workshops, as well as snow hikes. “There are digital-friendly areas, but you find people more and more staring at the mountains, watching the sunset,” he said.

Psychologist Paul J. Donahue, who has a practice focused on children and parents in Scarsdale, N.Y., said that in his clinical experience, children of wealthy parents face two major challenges: “a very intense pressure to achieve and then often a feeling of isolation from their parents.” All of this, he said, has intensified in recent years. “The biggest antidote we know against anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse is having a sense of family closeness,” Donahue said.

It’s time, not money, that limits these families in their ability to connect, said Christy Menzies, the Florida-based founder of Menzies Luxe Retreats. For that reason, it’s important for them to get the most out of their trips. She’s just not sure having a counselor present is the right way to achieve it. “To me, that’s a riskier endeavor, because you can start going in a direction you didn’t want to go.”

J. Stuart Ablon, psychologist and associate professor at Harvard Medical School, said retreats might be a starting point, but likely not a solution, to many families’ challenges. “If they’re complicated issues and family dynamics or significant challenges people are having, you’re not going to fix much in a five-night stay,” he said.

Patrycja Slawuta, a behavioral scientist in Australia, said that’s the point. “Taking people out of context, out of what’s familiar, actually opens their minds. People don’t take their usual roles that they normally do, they don’t sit at the same table they normally do,” she said. She currently works with private families and family offices on integrating family wealth and has held multigenerational retreats as part of that work.

With Australia in the midst of the largest generational transfer of wealth—a silver tsunami that is also sweeping other countries, including the U.S.—there has been an increased focus on family relationship dynamics. One of the top reasons that wealth transfers fail, various studies have found, has to do with poor communication and relationship challenges.

“People who don’t know how to integrate wealth, they’re getting torched by it,” said Slawuta, who works with wealthy, complex families who are typically already in the process of a wealth transfer. “In order for the system to thrive, it needs to evolve and it needs to learn, and it needs to be generative.”

Mornings at Bluestone start with family yoga or meditation in its geodesic dome. That’s followed by family breakfast on a sun-filled patio and a parent coaching session, where

everything from learning difficulties, sibling rivalries and relationship issues with either parent are on the table.

The company's co-founders, former human-resources executive Andrea Grant Robbiati and child and family psychologist Deirdre Brandner, came up with the idea during a girls' trip in 2019 to the New Zealand property, which Grant Robbiati owns.

Brandner had been having session after session with parents worried about their children, and Grant Robbiati was seeing parents whose struggles at home were spilling over into the workplace. The women, who each have three adult children, had the idea to cater to high-performing, high-earning parents who needed support connecting with their families.

"This is the first step," said Brandner, who emphasized she offers advice rather than traditional counseling to parents on-site. The company also does follow-up calls with guests after they leave, to help parents continue their journey.

Since 2023, they have hosted eight families on retreats, with Brandner on site to advise parents. The retreats have attracted interest from executives and the ultrawealthy, the co-founders said.

Some prospective clients have asked to host retreats on their own compounds for added privacy, the co-founders said. The global law firm Dentons has offered its corporate employees in Australia seminars from Bluestone Families.

"It's become more apparent that the parenting challenges of today's world are really a hidden stress for many of our leaders and employees," said Maureen Migliazzo, the chief operating officer for Dentons' Australasia region. "Managing parenting challenges is really an important aspect of our employees' well-being program."

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