

The thrill of the Shore, even with all those siblings

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Renting a house at the Jersey Shore for a family of double-digit children was a major feat. Soon after New Year's, our parents went to the Shore to find a place to rent. When they came back, we were eager to learn where we would vacation that summer. On the ocean? On the bay? In Avalon? In Seaside Park? Near friends from school?

One year our father said that we were staying at one of the religious sisters' retreat houses. "It is perfect," he said. "The chapel is just down the hall." What? We thought this would be a vacation. We acquiesced when we found out each kid would have his or her own room.

We had to consider the appropriate number of beds and the male/female splits and the age differences for any sleeping arrangements. Our mother said that real estate agents, at times, thought she was a parent fronting for an underage clan that wanted an extended senior week. Who needed that many rooms and that many beds? A few years, in fact, there were not enough beds, so we simply loaded a few extra (all pieces) onto the truck that took us to the Shore.

One year our father tried to persuade Mom to take over the lifeguard station; just walk across the street and you are on the beach. She vetoed the idea once she found out there were no curtains on the windows. Another year we actually rented a house from my mother's sister. That did not go over well with the 12 first cousins who had their summer vacation at the Shore cut short. Next plan . . .

Everything you did in a rental home was a time of discovery and adventure, even with the most mundane tasks. Within a day, though, our mother would be operating the house as if she had lived there her whole life.

One rental house had only one bathroom, so there were a lot of true accidents that summer. One house had no basement or outside shower, so our mother bathed the little kids in the utility sinks after we came from the beach.

Another home had cactus as a lawn covering. Mom and the older kids with good eyes spent many hours digging cactus splinters out of people's feet. Some were so scarred that they still won't take their shoes off, even at the Shore.

In one house with no basement that was built too close to the ground, crickets were everywhere. They sought shelter in our shoes. To this day, some of us check our sneakers before putting them on - just in case a cricket found them to be a comfortable resting spot.

A couple of the houses had two kitchens, which was great; but the one with an extra kitchen on the second floor made a convenient excuse for the children on why we were not helping out ("Oh, I went to the kitchen to help and nothing was happening").

Not all houses had washers or dryers, so there was plenty of time in the laundromat. At least we could read comic books and chew gum there. Both activities seemed a good fit.

There were few houses with any amenities. It could be hotter than July and our mother would say, "If you keep still, you won't be hot." Good strategy, Ma.

One house actually had numbers on the doors of each bedroom, so when we arrived at the rental, a list was posted on the refrigerator with our names next to a room number. We went to sleep that first night with sand in the bed, dampness in the air, and the sound of the ocean waves hitting the surf. That is the feel of summertime at the Jersey Shore, no matter where you went.

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