



THE FIRST TIME I heard the term was when a co-worker shrieked "Off-sites are awesome!" on hearing that our staff would be undertaking a two-day company retreat at Mohonk Mountain House, a resort in New York's Hudson Valley. The goals: brainstorming and bonding. I cringed at the thought of being cooped up with rah-rah types brown-nosing the boss, of being obliged to make "whoop whoop" sounds at every turn. I'm happy to report my stoked associate was right: Our off-site was awesome, a way to disrupt the office hierarchy and connect on a personal level, despite the awkward bonding exercises prescribed by a peppy facilitator. (One assignment was to draw a picture reflecting our personality type. Mine looked like an alien stick figure with a bad bob.)

Nowadays, off-sites have evolved beyond the cursory meeting-in-the-day, carousing-at-night model into team-building life experiences in destinations chosen to impress. "People want to stay at the hot hotels, especially the younger crowd who love getting asked to a weekend to Cabo," said Stacy Small, CEO of Los Angeles-based Elite Travel International, who has planned corporate programs at Maui's Ritz-Carlton Kapalua and Montage Los Cabos in Mexico.

Bragging rights have a new angle too. "It's less about getting a splashy entertainer or pouring on the Champagne and more about planning activities to do together," said Troy Haas, CEO of Brownell, a travel agency in Birmingham, Ala., which has designed corporate

incentive programs for 35 years. Today's getaways focus on creating trust, he said. "Getting people off site with their [bosses] builds strong relationships if you do things together—especially out in nature." One group experienced falconry in Ireland, said Mr. Haas. "When there's a bump in business, that relationship building helps individuals get through the ups and downs together."

At my off-site in Mohonk, no birds of prey swooped in to teach us trust, but we achieved a lively camaraderie while trooping en masse around the lake. My bragging rights from that trip? I met my best friend and still wear the olive fleece I got in the welcome bag.

With loftier budgets, team building might involve skidding up a glacier together in Banff, Alberta or participating in an "Amazing Race"-style competition with vintage cars through Napa Valley, Calif. But it is not just about adrenaline and spoiling people, said Jack Ezon, founder of New York City-based Embark Beyond, a firm that arranges bespoke travel for financial services groups. "We introduce cultural experiences, especially to younger staff, taking them to vineyards, doing art tours, going on a safari—activities their clients normally do," said Mr. Ezon.

Sometimes bonding is a mere subway ride away. Thera Clark, sommelier at the Beatrice Inn, in Manhattan, suggested a staff trip to Coney Island to chef/owner Angie Mar. Ms. Mar brought beers and funnel cake; the team rode the Wonder Wheel together. What's not to love? —*Donna Bulseco*

IN SMALL COMPANIES, there are random duties that accrete to people whether they like it or not: Marsha keeps up with tech, Owen plans baby showers. At my firm, I'm the Off-site Guy. I know of no secret locations ("I swear Worcester is better than Vegas!"). I bring no experience as a camp counselor ("and now my favorite trust fall, the Tibetan Cloud!"). There is nothing in my job duties that would suggest that orchestrating off-sites should be added to them. I was just unlucky to have done it 15 years ago and no one will end my misery. And while not every event at every off-site I've planned has stunk, certain inexorable facts make them hard to love.

Activities that are enjoyable at, say, a bachelor party—driving fast cars, parasailing, those weird antigravity tunnels—are best done with your real friends. Some folks are tempted by a related line of logic: People like to drink a lot, people like to dance, your colleagues are people, so at the off-site, your colleagues should be drinking a lot, dancing, or both. This is a stupid idea—but not an uncommon one. "There have been plenty of events where I've had to address [drunken] behavior," said Shay Hurst, an Atlanta-based senior vice president of human resources who has facilitated dozens of off-site meetings. "People are having a good time, they don't have the family responsibilities and they partake more than they should." Chris Hunsicker, an executive coach in Salt Lake City, Utah, dis-

penses one crucial bit of wisdom that we'd all be wise to remember: There's always the group of people who go back to the bar after dinner... and that's where things go wrong. It's like what your mom said: Nothing good happens after midnight."

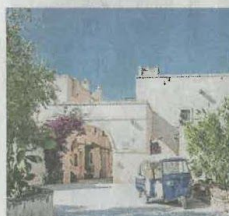
Another reason to hate off-sites? People complain. A lot. Participants mope most frequently, said Ms. Hurst, about glitchy tech and lousy food. But, in my experience, some people find fault no matter what. At every company retreat, I have an out-of-body experience in which I make fun of the loser who planned it, only to realize it's me. I've had to accept the fact early and forever: Cool Guys never change. You could arrange for them to tandem hang glide with George Clooney and Charlize Theron, and the Cool Guys would still insist that work events are lame-o.

There are about four activities that actually work. After many off-sites, I've found that the ones people hate the least are those that would most appeal to 12-year-olds: dodgeball, go-karts, Ping-Pong, cornhole. Everyone can participate. Everyone can mock everyone, either for being bad ("You're holding the paddle upside down, Greg") or being good ("Does Jose have a Ping-Pong coach?"). These aren't Bucket List experiences, so no staffers wish they were doing them with their college roommates. And you might even have so much fun that you'll forget, briefly, that you enjoy your colleagues most back at the office, when they are actually productive adults. —*Gary Semovitz*

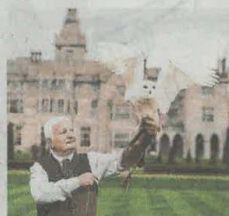
WHY I LOVE THEM

WHY I HATE THEM

WORKAROUNDS / FIVE RESORTS THAT BEAT YOUR DREARY CONFERENCE ROOM—RANGING FROM FAIRLY AFFORDABLE TO TRULY BUDGET-BUSTING



Borgo Egnazia, Puglia, Italy
Situating in the seaside city of Savelletri di Fasano, the luxury hotel's limestone villas, spa and Michelin-starred restaurants nicely deliver on atmosphere and amenities. But it's the activities on-site and nearby that make it impressive, said Embark Beyond's Jack Ezon, who took a private equity group of 180 there two summers ago. There was a vintage-car road rally in the village square, day trips to vineyards and an archaeologist-led tour of Bronze Age tombs. Borgo's chefs also did a cooking contest with teams that were orchestrated "to mix it up, so staff and leadership could make connections across the normal work hierarchies," said Mr. Ezon. *From about \$300 a night, borgoegnazia.com*



Adare Manor, Limerick, Ireland
Your corporate clan receives the aristocratic "Horse and Hounds" welcome at the gates of this neo-Gothic Manor House, with skilled riders and well-behaved canines beckoning (and barking) them in. A gracious formality defines the property. It sits on the scenic Wild Atlantic Way, with 830 acres of manicured parkland that includes a championship golf course, site of the Ryder Cup in 2026. One glance at the chandeliered meeting rooms, kitted out to host small teams or groups of up to 440, show the boss was serious about boardroom bonding. Together time is equally impressive: fly fishing, archery competitions or whiskey tastings. *From about \$360 a night, adaremanor.com*



Montage Los Cabos, Mexico
Cabo has put a lot of money into upgrading infrastructures, so the better highways, airport and convention center make it a place that works for high-end incentive-type trips," said Elite Travel's Stacy Small. Ms. Small helped organize a recent trip that brought some 40 top producers (and significant others) to this resort on Santa Maria Bay. While poolside cabanas and mezcal tastings are as big of a draw as the plentiful meeting and event space, the field trips tend to be crowd-pleasers too. Team-building, says Ms. Small, works particularly well over the farm-table-fare at Flora Farms, in the foothills of the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains. *From about \$625 a night, montagehotels.com*



Blackberry Mountain, Walland, Tennessee
The new sibling of Tennessee's renowned resort Blackberry Farm spans 5,200 acres in the Great Smoky Mountains and boasts "lavish cabins and cottages" (not an oxymoron here). But luxury takes the form of wellness pampering: yoga at sunrise with epic views of the mountains; hikes on the Roaring Branch trail to a waterfall, canoeing or shooting clay pigeons. "There's an emphasis on outdoor experiences, from rock climbing and mountain biking to fly-fishing and foraging," said Anthony Giglio, a wine expert who recently conducted a wine tasting "with a competitive edge" at the resort. *From \$1,045 per night, blackberrymountain.com*



Farm at Cape Kidnappers, North Island, New Zealand
Set on 6,000 acres of pasture in relatively remote Hawke's Bay—a four-hour drive from Wellington, the closest international airport—the Farm at Cape Kidnappers has a name that suggests somewhere Captain Jack Sparrow might convene an off-site for his mates. But this luxury lodge, with its 22 suites and four-bedroom cottage, holds treasures more suitable for head honchos (like hedge-fund manager, philanthropist and owner Julian Robertson) on a retreat: a par-71 golf course with ocean views, sourced-on-the-spot seasonal cuisine, and treks in a Mad-Max-like Can-Am across rugged terrain. *From \$1,350 a night, robertsonlodges.com —D. B.*