

WHERE THEY WENT

The Boston Globe

Get with the program, hard by the Pacific

By Diane Daniel, Globe Correspondent | November 5, 2006

WHO: David, 47, and Theresa Lee, 45, and their children, Tom, 13, and Michelle, 10, of Merrimack, N.H.

WHERE: Santa Barbara, Calif.

WHEN: One week in July

WHY: The Lees chose to stay at the Santa Barbara Family Vacation Center (familyvacationcenter.com), a program through the alumni association of the University of California, Santa Barbara, because it was something the whole family could do but had built-in flexibility.

SECOND TIME AROUND: This was the Lees' second time at the camp on campus, which overlooks the Pacific Ocean. David found it online last year and they liked it so much they returned. No one need be a UCSB graduate, but one member of the family must join the alumni association (\$50 for the year).

LEARNING CURVES: The session starts on Saturday, when students help guests move in. "Theresa and I signed up for a walking tour of Santa Barbara and also an evening where they drop you off, you eat dinner, and they pick you up. Baby-sitting is included. I also went on a hike above the hills of Santa Barbara and Theresa did some surfing," he said. Michelle, who surfed last year, signed up again this year. She also did indoor rock climbing and boogie boarding. Both Tom and Michelle had friends who also returned this year. Tom won the week's table tennis tournament and Michelle was named "craft princess" for her many arts and crafts projects.

PARENTS . . . RELAX? : "One of the nice things with the kids is you let them go off and experience things and explore. You can change the limits a little," David said. "I was amazed at the staff taking care of the kids. Most of them are college-age students. You have the chance to relax, which is a joy for parents. And it was good for our son to be around college-age kids to see the kind of person he can be." There are separate adult activities where alcohol is served, such as dinners and a casino night.

BED AND BOARD: The families stayed in college dorm suites. Theirs had two bedrooms with two beds each, a common room, and a bathroom. "There are no TVs or radio, but you can bring your own. And they do provide Internet." There were common areas with games and a pool table. The food was fine, David said: "For serving 200 or 300 people at a time, it was very good, with a variety of choices." And, said Michelle, "There's pizza every single day."

SHOWTIME: The staff does more than lead activities and baby-sit. It also entertains. "They put on a really funny welcome show," Michelle said. "The next day there was a carnival with a cookout and games and they dress funny, this year as bugs." They also put on a talent show with the kids, a water show, and a number of games and races. The week ended with a skit satirizing "Riverdance," which was hilarious, Michelle and her dad agreed. ■