TRAVEL

Plan a special New Year celebration near or far away

BY CORINNE ABATT
SPECIAL WRITER

Where will you be when the new millennium rolls in? In some faraway place of wonder and excitement? At a party to end all parties? At your favorite watering hole? Having a glass of champagne with a few choice friends? Sitting on your old couch watching the Times Square celebration on the boob tube? In a basement closet waiting for doomsday surrounded by canned food and jugs of water, just in case...?

If you like any of the first three, but haven't finalized your plans, it's time to get cracking.

There is still space in some choice vacation spots, according to Linda Munson, director of marketing at Royal International Travel Inc. of Birmingham.

"Sure," she said, "some people are concerned about Y2K problems and are staying in their own backyard, but there's plenty of space for those who want to travel...people are going on safari in Africa, to Mexico and Disney in Florida."

She said some of the space is a result of the sharp rise in prices early on as Y2K came into focus.

"Hotels raised their prices. They're coming down now. Cruise companies got carried away and extended their cruises to 21 days. Now, they're offering 10-day cruises."

She said a year ago, Renaissance Cruises demanded a $5,000 per person deposit.

"That's outrageous," she said.

While much of this has since changed for the better, Munson cautioned, "Hotel rooms are very high in New York — for those who want to see the ball drop."

Rochelle Lieberman of Gateway Travel of Southfield and Troy said, "Not too many are worried about Y2K. A lot of people are looking for the exotic — they want to be by the Eiffel Tower in Paris or Tahiti for the millennium. For a while prices were very high. Now (as of mid-October) there was lots of space available because people were waiting to see if prices will come down. For those who like a warm climate, there's a lot of big New Year's Eve parties on cruises."

Chuck Suppnick, regional manager for Your Man Tours of Dearborn, said his company is offering a package trip to Los Angeles and the Tournament of Roses in Pasadena on New Year's Day.

"We're not even offering Hawaii. We couldn't get the airlines to commit on fares." As of last month, there was still room on the L.A. trip.

Cradles of history

Yearn to celebrate this momentous night in one of the cradles of American history?

Washington D.C. rolls out the red, white and blue carpet with a three-day, family-oriented celebration on the National Mall. The White House Millennium Council and Smithsonian Institution are planning this event.

The President and Mrs. Clinton will host the New Year's Eve gala at the Lincoln Memorial against a background of music by marching bands, a concert by Quincy Jones and a world premiere film by Steven Spielberg on a super-size screen. All this will be capped off by a midnight fireworks display over Washington Monument. All of the events are free and open to the public.

Two of the five downtown Washington D.C. hotels I contacted still have rooms available for millennium weekend — Best Western Capitol (800) 242-4831 and Washington Park Perrase, owned by Doubletree Guest Suites, (800) 333-TREE. You can find a complete listing of hotels on the Web at www.Washington.org

Boston is making its traditional First Night even livelier. Many of the big hotels are holding black tie galas with a special overnight package. For the biggest, and best of these, the bill could run well into four figures. Among the overnight/black tie party deals are those at the Boston Park Plaza ($900 per couple, (617) 426-6000) and the Hyatt Harborside ($809.59 per couple, (800) 233-1234). For a complete hotel listing on the Web, go to www.Boston.org Botson hotelguide.net

For the budget-minded, jeans crowd, there's Boston's International Youth Hostel, $20 for members, $23 for others, call (617) 536-9455 for information.

As for restaurants, from the most elegant to the ubiquitous street corner cafes in Cambridge, festive big night celebrations will be going full blast. You'll need reservations for elegant dining at the city's finest restaurants such as Clio, Les Zygomates and Maison Robert. Walk-ins will have the best shot for seats at small ethnic eateries around Harvard and Central squares in Cambridge.

In the mood for something less hectic? How about a Y2K dinner cruise? Boston offers three. Call Boston Harbor Cruises, (617) 227-4321, Massachusetts Bay Lines, (617) 542-8000 or Spirit of Boston, (617) 748-1450 for prices and reservations.

Colonial Williamsburg, celebrating its 300th birthday in the millennium, will have New Year's Eve fireworks and a First Night celebration. For information, call 1-(800) HISTORY. The holiday atmosphere and decorations at Williamsburg have few equals. Sunday champagne brunch at holiday time in the lap of history is memorable.

Lois Kozlow of Birmingham's Lark Tours canceled a trip to Egypt to watch the millennium unfold over the cradle of civilization because of uncertain costs.

"The suppliers were holding us up, tripling, quadrupling expenses. They were pricing themselves out of the market. Now, they're coming around because they have space."

Kozlow opted instead to plan what she calls "two spring trips." The first, to Tunisia and Malta, will be next April. The second, to South America — Brazil, Uruguay, Patagonia and Chile — is slated for October, springtime in the Southern hemisphere. For information, call Lark Tours, (248) 644-3335.

Michigan getaways

If you plan to celebrate, but would rather not stray too far afield, there will be lots to do in Michigan. Grand Traverse Resort in Traverse City, is offering a three-night and a seven-night New Year's Eve package, featuring a Governor's Hall New Year's Eve party as well as activities for youngsters and adults. For information, call (800) 748-0303.

New Year's eve parties for all ages are in the works at Shanty Creek in Bellaire. For more about these, call (800) 678-4111.

If you decide to stay home and enjoy the holiday season with friends, there are many ways to make it special. For instance, see the Wayne County Lightfest, four miles of lights along Ann Arbor Trail in Westland or the special exhibit, "Your Place in Time" at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. It opens Dec. 15 and runs for a year, illustrating how technology has changed our lives over the past century.

If your destination for ushering in the new millennium is a favorite local haunt, make reservations now. Julia Reyes, manager at Peabody's of Birmingham, said they already have reservations (eight or more only) for their always festive New Year's Eve with live music and lots of space for dancing.

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SKI HOTLINE
AAA Michigan and Travel Michigan offer a guide to services at all of Michigan's ski area and it is available free at all Auto Club offices. Also, the ski phone line will start up in December; call (888) 78-GREAT (784-7328) for daily ski conditions. The same number will get a free copy of AAA's Ski Michigan booklet which contains a two-for-one coupon for mid-week skiing at participating ski runs. In southeast Michigan, Alpine Valley near Milford will use a water-cooling tower to help make dryer snow earlier in the season. They have remodeled their lodge and will be offering Sunday night lift tickets at 40 percent off for their 40th anniversary. At Pine Knob in Clarkston they have increased snowmaking capacity, lengthened the race hill by 25 percent, and upgraded the lodge and cafeteria.

CEDAR POINTERS
The Sandusky, Ohio, amusement park received two honors. The National Amusement Park Historical Association voted the park's Magnum XL-200 the favorite steel roller coaster in the world. Readers of Family fun magazine rated the park the top amusement park in the Midwest for families.

FLY FIRST CLASS
"Ninety-five percent of people traveling first class get there by asking, not by paying first-class prices," says Joel Widzer, travel expert and author. He reveals how to fly first class on a regular basis, stay at the world's best hotels at a fraction of the cost, and drive a luxury car at sub-compact prices in his new book, "The Penny Pincher's Passport to Luxury Travel" (Travelers' Tales, $12.95). Widzer's techniques are based on the simple premise of asking. Knowing who to ask and what to say are key to becoming a first-class traveler.

FREE METRO TRAVEL GUIDE
The Metropolitan Detroit Convention and Visitors Bureau publishes a free quarterly full color magazine with maps and events listings for this area. The guide includes entertainment and sports schedules as well as restaurant guides. Call (800) 338-7648 or go to their Web site (visitdetroit.com) for a copy.

CHRISTMAS ON RAILS
The Bluewater Michigan Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society will sponsor December trips to Frankenmuth and Crossroads Village. Once at the village, participants will ride on the Huckleberry Railroad. Tours also include a trip to Bronner's, dinner at the Bavarian Inn (both in Frankenmuth) and a trip to Crossroads and a train shop tour. Buses leave from Dearborn's Bicentennial Library (Dec. 4), Royal Oak's Amtrak/bus station (Dec. 11), and Livonia's Ford Field (Dec. 18) at 11 a.m. and you can expect to be back by 11 p.m. For tickets and more information, call Bluewater at (248) 541-1000 or (800) 594-5162.

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