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Latest trend for Hispanic girls -- destination 'quinces'

BY TERE FIGUERAS NEGRETE

In planning her *quince* celebration, Nicole Lora of Pembroke Pines pictured herself joining her father for the requisite formal dance in a traditional *quinceañera* ball gown.

Then Nicole discovered a relatively new trend in the centuries-old tradition of celebrating a young Latin girl's coming of age: the destination *quince*.

Now, Nicole -- along with parents, cousins and an entourage of about 20 people -- will mark her 15th birthday with a weeklong cruise aboard Royal Caribbean's Liberty of the Seas, tiara and tulle gown in tow.

The destination *quince*, similar to its bridal counterpart the destination wedding, is part of a burgeoning market aimed at the increasingly affluent *quinceañera* -- or, more accurately, parents of *quinceañeras*.

Disney World began this spring offering *quinces* packages, the priciest of which can exceed \$20,000.

Southwest Airlines has signed on as a corporate sponsor of a national *quince* expo that travels to major Hispanic markets, including Miami, Dallas, Los Angeles and Chicago.

And travel agencies and cruise lines are fine-tuning their offerings for a modern *quinceañera* reluctant to confine her birthday bash to a hotel ballroom or strip-mall *salón*. Cruises to the Bahamas and the Caribbean, complete with such *quinces*-themed activities as fashion shows, slumber parties and beachside barbecues, are popular packages.

One Hialeah travel agency, Viajes Principal, offers a 17-day, \$5,000-a-person tour of Europe for *quinceañeras* and their families, culminating with a formal dinner atop the Eiffel Tower and boat tour down the Seine, the girls decked out in their *quince* regalia.

DOUBLE CELEBRATIONS

There are even double-*quinces*, which include a stateside celebration as well as an equally elaborate fete in the family's homeland.

It's a sign not only of the blinged-out party aesthetic embraced by teens weaned on MTV's *My Super Sweet 16* -- which has featured several *quinces* episodes -- but of the growing economic clout of U.S. Hispanics.

The buying power of Hispanics in the United States is about \$838 billion and is expected to reach more than \$1.3 trillion by 2011, according to a May report by the investment banking firm The Mercanti Group. The report singles out the rising cost of *quinces* as a significant benchmark.

The national average for a *quince* is between \$5,000 and \$10,000, with a guest list of about 200 -- although South Florida festivities are often more expensive and more lavish, said Will Cain, publisher of Quince Girl magazine, which launched last year.

"Miami is a market where people are willing to spend more, and that goes hand-in-hand with the *quinceañera* trends we're seeing," said Cain, noting the popularity of stretch Hummers, A-list DJs and other stylistic fillips more associated with, say, a hip-hop video than a teenage girl's birthday party.

"Paying \$25,000 or more for a *quince* is not out of the question," he said.

For Nicole Lora's parents, opting for a destination *quince* seemed less daunting than orchestrating a landlocked celebration.

"She wanted to go all out with a party, like they do on *My Super Sweet 16*," said Beth Lora, who works part time as a teacher's aide and whose husband, José, owns a transportation and logistics company.

"This is so much easier," she said.

The family's trip aboard the Liberty of the Seas costs about \$1,000 a person and was organized by West Miami-Dade's Happy Holidays Travel. Relatives are flying in from Michigan, as are friends from José Lora's native Puerto Rico, to join the cruise.

"I could have had just the regular party, but it would be over in four hours," said Nicole, who is starting 10th grade at St. Thomas Aquinas High School.

"This would be seven days to spend with my friends and family," she said.

She and two dozen other *quinceañeras* left Saturday from the Port of Miami, following a final, last-minute rehearsal of the elaborately choreographed dance performance -- a staple of traditional *quinces*. Some modern touches appear on the itinerary as well, such as a party on a Mexican beach, a tropical luau and a professionally made video of the girls frolicking aboard the Liberty of the Seas' various attractions, such as the wave pool and ice-skating rink.

"We're seeing a huge trend in travel right now," said Cindy Benavides, president and chief executive officer of the Dallas-based Strategic Events, which partners with Quince Girl to organize *quinceañera* expos.

Disney is also wooing *quinceañeras*.

The Orlando theme park's push to attract young Latin girls is a natural fit, said Mari Santana, a Disney World public relations manager.

'The message of a *quince* is, 'You are our princess, and we expect the best from you,' " Santana said. "And this is, of course, the land of the fantasy princess."

Packages start at \$1,800 for a small dessert reception for 25 people ensconced on a private island to watch the nightly lakeside fireworks display at Epcot.

The priciest is the aptly named "Belle of the Ball," which starts at \$20,000 and includes a full reception for 100 people.

The *quince*-as-branding-opportunity has crossed over to mainstream products: Mattel debuted its *Quinceañera* Barbie in 2001; JCPenney is marketing itself as a one-stop-shop for all things *quinces*, including shoes and personalized portraits; David's Bridal, the nation's largest bridal retailer, now showcases *quinceañera* gowns alongside wedding dresses.

Miami-based Royal Caribbean has embraced the *quince* market as part of a larger push to appeal to U.S. Hispanics, said Rebecca Barba, manager of multicultural marketing for the cruise line.

MIXING ELEMENTS

The cruise line has also nurtured its international *quince* market, which, like its American counterparts, feature a mix of modern and traditional elements.

"This is not a spring-breaker crowd," said Sofia Cejas, regional director for international sales and marketing for Royal Caribbean. "They are very ladylike."

And they don't travel light, either.

"Some even pay to bring their own hair and makeup people aboard, or videographers. The possibilities are endless," Cejas said.

For those unable, or perhaps unwilling, to travel abroad for a destination *quince*, there is yet another way to ensure the birthday girl can include far-flung relatives in the festivities: webcasting.

Such companies as the Dallas-based Blue Juice Media offer live, streaming video of *quinces* from about \$750 for a simple connection to their broadband network to several thousand dollars -- not including travel expenses -- to bring a team of videographers to the event, president A.T. Holt said.

"This is the next big craze," Holt said.