

Super Steep Sixteen

Wait till you see the bill for the party helicopter

By Michelle Andrews

Held aloft on a magic carpet by six strapping men in fezzes, 12-year-old Alexa Ashley made her entrance to her June bat mitzvah party at luxurious Oheka Castle in Huntington, Long Island, in true princess-for-a-day style. While 308 guests looked on, laser lights splashed her name across the walls. The dance floor, specially flown in from Florida for the occasion, lit up with the words "Remember the Magic," a Disney song and the party theme.

At dinner, kids sat at tables representing different Disney rides, with elaborate centerpieces (one had tiny moving figures), while parents sat at Epcot Center-themed tables representing countries of the world. After dancing the night away to Soul Street (the same band that played at Billy Joel's wedding), guests were presented with bagels, coffee, and a fake copy of the Sunday *New York Times* featuring Alexa's picture and a story about her.

Debit. Over the top? Alexa's mother doesn't think so. "Nowadays, it's a heck of a lot different than when we were kids," says Mindy Ashley, though she allows that her husband, Michael, a mortgage banker (and professional racecar driver), "will be working the next 10 years to replenish the bank account."

As the second season of the hit MTV show *My Super Sweet Sixteen* amply demonstrates, lavish spending on teenage milestone events is increasingly the norm in many circles. "Today, it's all about supersizing," says *Sweet Sixteen* Executive Producer Nina Diaz. "Money is no object."

So what does it cost to



TEEN FOR A DAY. From sweet 16s to bat mitzvah bashes, over the top is increasingly the norm.

throw a no-holds-barred bash? Michael Cerbelli, creative director of Englewood, N.J.-based Total Entertainment, who produced the Ashley party, says a typical event for 200 people might cost \$60,000 to \$70,000. "But that's just average," he says. "Some halls cost \$65,000 just to get the place, with \$300 a plate on top of that." The Ashley event, needless to say, wasn't an average party. Steve Kemble, an event planner based in Dallas, says \$100,000 is not unusual and he organizes close to a dozen parties

a year that cost more than \$500,000.

With a blank-check mentality, families are limited only by their imagination. Event planners describe kids arriving at their parties by helicopter or on horseback; skywriters spelling out the child's name while guests sip cocktails on the lawn; panthers, monkeys, and parrots for a jungle-themed party. The biggest concern isn't the cost; it's that the party be one of a kind. "My job is to keep my eyes and ears open," says Kemble. "There's nothing worse than finding out that Danielle's having a Hawaiian party, too."

Well, maybe there are a few things worse than that. "It's like Rome before Rome fell," says Susan Linn, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School who studies consumer behavior in children. "This increase in extravagance is supposed to be about finding real true meaning."

Researchers aren't surprised. In a session with teenagers, they were looking for their own version of Michael V. and the Teenage Researcher, a 1990s-era TV show from Brook, Ill. As for the generation that will be trying to make sense of the money spent with them, they're not waiting.

Maybe so. But the figures on a party that can't wait.

PARTY FLAVORS

Want your teenager's party to stand out? Event planners say these are the hottest trends.

Parties in warehouses. Decorators can turn the huge unfinished space into a fantasyland for a night.

Color-shifting tables. LED-fitted plexiglass tables change color throughout the evening.

Bobble-head dolls. Your own personalized nodding head, created from a photo while you wait.

Salons. Mini beauty and manicure setups tease hair into funky up-dos, give manicures and pedicures.

Chocolate fountains. Dip fruit, pound cake, or marshmallows into bubbling goodness.



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