
A vacation from your vacation? Seriously?

By Beth Teitell

Globe Staff / July 28, 2011

When Johnny Graham, 40, a personal chef on Martha's Vineyard, visits his family in Missouri he spends hours alone fishing and bike riding. At least that's what his loved ones are led to believe. The rides are actually two blocks long, to a cafe. And the closest he comes to actual fishing is when he throws a rod in his car. "You can be gone for five or six hours," he said. "No one wants to hear fishing stories."

Duplicitous? Certainly. But it's preferable to saying what he thinks: "I need a break from you and I'm going to a bar."

This summer, from July 1 through the end of September, Americans will take about 580 million trips, and spend about \$700 per person, per trip, according to Shane Norton, a director at IHS Global Insight, a Lexington-based economic consulting firm.

We will take off our shoes and belts for the TSA, and endure long layovers with small children. We will deplete our savings, cash in our hard-earned vacation time, spend hours online trying to make our frequent flier miles work. We will go into a frenzy of pre-trip busyness, making arrangements to have the mail held, prescriptions filled, the plants watered, the dog boarded. As President Kennedy said, albeit about a somewhat longer trip, "We choose to go to the moon . . . not because [it is] easy, but because [it is] hard."

And yet, as J. Courtney Sullivan, the author of the new bestseller "Maine," a novel about three generations of women at a summer home, explained, vacationing with family or friends can be like "an immersion course" in other people. "When you're all under one roof, it brings out the best - and worst."

That's especially true now, said Bryan Robinson, a professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and author of "Chained to the Desk." "A lot of people are afraid to take vacations because of the economy, and when they do go on vacation, they take that worry with them. That's increasing every year."

Given the pressure, it's little surprise that only 45 percent of Americans return to work from a vacation feeling rested and rejuvenated, according to a 2010 study by the travel site Expedia

, or that 40 percent of workers in the UK return to work more stressed than before their vacations, according to a 2010 study by the London-based Institute of Leadership & Management.

In Boston, Jill Parker, a graphic designer just back from a two-week trip to visit her mother-in-law in England, summed up the situation like this: "Sometimes you need a vacation from your vacation."

Parker, 35, of Lynn, had a lovely time with her traveling party, which included her husband, son, mother, and stepfather, all staying in her mother-in-law's small house, but even so, she felt the need to escape, sometimes from her child, sometimes from the adults. She'd announce she needed to shower, and retreat upstairs for more than an hour. Or she'd find sudden urgency to show little Colum the sites, and hustle him off in his stroller so she could be (sort of) alone.

Figures on annoyance-related vacation sneak-offs don't exist. The industry generally releases more upbeat reports, like the May survey from SpringHill Suites by Marriott reporting that three-quarters of Americans said taking a vacation will be important to their mental health.

While there are scholarly studies looking at the correlation between vacations and happiness or well-being, most don't get into petty issues - like a person pretending she has to go to the bathroom just to get a break from her visiting former college roommate (more on that play in a moment).

Jeroen Nawijn, a senior lecturer in tourism at Breda University of Applied Sciences, in the Netherlands, said his studies show that a travel party can be a blessing or a burden. "Most people enjoy the companionship though," he wrote in an e-mail, "[b]ut if arguments arise, it's difficult to take a break from each other."

His study on happiness and vacations, published in the journal *Applied Research in Quality of Life* in 2010, found that vacationers reported more pre-trip happiness, compared to non-vacationers, but that only a very relaxed holiday trip boosts vacationers' happiness further after return. "Generally, there is no difference between vacationers' and non-vacationers' post-trip happiness," the study concluded.

Nawijn did not investigate how people get away from their getaways, but talk to a few non-academics, and you quickly see that the ruses fall into several recognizable types.

There's the "stretch," in which a legitimate activity - running an errand, exercising, sending off a work e-mail - is extended to its absolute believable maximum time period - and beyond. One husband described the strategy like this: "When you get out, you stay out."

That's the tactic used by Ryan Wilkes, 30, a doctor in Boston. When he's home, he runs three or four miles at a seven-minute pace. But when visiting family, he runs six miles at an eight-minute pace - and not because he's not in a rush. "On the fourth or fifth day everyone's been around each other constantly," he said. "I stretch it."

Rebecca Chambers, 25, of Brookline, was so desperate to get away from her visiting college roommate that she feigned the need to go to the bathroom "to clear my head," and the next morning pretended to be asleep because she couldn't face her friend's constant chatter.

"I was looking forward to her visit," Chambers said, "and the first night was OK, but the second night, I was like, I want my regular life back."

Sometimes vacationers are too desperate to think of anything clever, and simply lie, said Amy Nobile, coauthor of "I Was a Really Good Mom Before I Had Kids," and "I'd Trade My Husband for a Housekeeper."

Nobile laughingly recounted how one woman told her husband that she needed to get out of the sun for fear of burning, and headed for the bar. But no one's happy about trying to escape a vacation, she said. "You feel like on a vacation you should be relaxed, and if you're not, you wonder, is there something wrong with me? Am I warped?"

Probably not, said Debbie Mandel, author of "Addicted to Stress." Even under good conditions, being on all the time is fatiguing, she pointed out. And needless to say, conditions aren't always ideal. "Good friends and family members are not clones, so sometimes we get manipulated to do things we don't want to do to please them instead of ourselves," Mandel wrote in an e-mail. "In addition, these people have our undivided attention which could mean unloading their problems, disappointments, and emptiness."

She recommends people plan to carve out "me time" during the trip. "This way family/friends expect that you will do your own thing for part of the time as it is part of the schedule."

But many vacationers say they don't anticipate needing to escape until it's too late.

That's what happened to Micha Maalouf, 22, a recent college graduate, from Boston. She was looking forward to escaping with pals on a trip to the Camp Bisco music festival in upstate New York. But after spending 12 hours together in the car and hanging out, she could no longer handle the stress of planning which act to see or what to have for meals.

"I felt the need to go off on my own," she said, "for quite some time."

Beth Teitell can be reached at bteitell@globe.com. Follow her on twitter @bethteitell.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.