



10 ways to leave with your lover

Peter Johansen, The Ottawa Citizen

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It's not always easy for couples to steal away together. Jobs, childcare responsibilities, limited finances and incompatible expectations can all get in the way. But experts in family relationships and travel offer 10 tips for successful short escapes:

- Be clear about what you both expect: "You have to figure out what's romantic for you," says Marilyn Belleghem, a registered marriage and family therapist in Burlington, Ont. Is it paddling down the Spanish River or strolling through Quebec City? But have realistic expectations. "Don't get the idea you're going to have a Harlequin romance," warns Gordon Walker, a University of Alberta tourism researcher. "Just remember they're books, they're fiction."
- Accommodate divergent interests: Take turns choosing a destination or go where there's something for both -- skiing for one, spas for the other. "Couples don't have to be together every minute," says Ottawa-based couples therapist Martin Rovers. "But they have to both want to be at the same place together."
- Do something new: Family counsellor Vera Dyck of Guelph, who wrote a thesis on couples' time, recommends expanding your horizons by pursuing new things together. Walker agrees: "If you do the same thing all the time, you're not escaping. You're simply taking the same old things with you to a new place."
- Start small: You don't have to go out of town. "You can sneak away anywhere," Rovers says. "Take the dog for a walk together. It's healthy, the dog likes it, and you better have something to say to each other or the silence will be deafening. It may be better to have a half-hour walk every night than a week in the Bahamas."
- Make trip-planning a joint responsibility: Research by the Travel Industry Association shows women are more likely to plan vacations than men. But Dyck says women -- who tend to be the family schedulers -- often want their partners to take more responsibility for getaway logistics.
- Ask for help: "Use the in-laws for their real purpose -- to look after the kids," Rovers advises. Couples with supportive families have less stress about getting away, Dyck notes. If grandparents aren't nearby, try swapping weekends of childcare duty with trusted friends.
- Stay connected, if you must: Bring a cellphone or laptop if you need to stay in touch with family, Belleghem says. "It's terrible if you have to say the hospital can't reach you if something happens to an aging parent. It just adds to your stress at exactly the time you need to get away the most." But Rovers suggests turning it off at agreed-upon times, such as dinner.

- Leave responsibility behind: "The problem is that we forget about being each other's lover," Belleghem says. "Don't go shopping for a new couch for the family room. This is not the time to talk about the kids or the mortgage. When responsibility walks in the door, romance flies out the window."

- Don't put it off: "Things have to get to the crisis point before some people get away," says Dyck. "If you leave things till they're that bad, though, a vacation's not much fun. It's awkward and strained." On the other hand, Belleghem says, "When you get away from the responsibilities -- cutting the grass or feeding the kids or making the bed -- the real issues in your relationship come to the fore. That then becomes something for that couple to deal with."

- Make your relationship a priority: Too busy to go away? "Make a choice," says Rovers. "Take the work or take the relationship. Take the kids or take the relationship. But remember that the best thing you can give the kids is a good relationship."

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