



## Two for the Road

**More than half - 54 per cent - of couples did not take a vacation together in the last year**

**Peter Johansen, The Ottawa Citizen**

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Mark Mayhew retired and promptly bought himself a motorcycle. Riding became a passion. He started attending bikers' rallies. But when the former defence policy specialist told his wife, Katherine Baird, that he planned to attend yet another one last July in Wisconsin, she suggested they turn it into a road trip for two.

Katherine booked four weeks off her job as special projects manager at the Public Policy Forum, an Ottawa think tank, and joined Mark for a 12,500-kilometre trek through the western United States.

They caught a Cirque du Soleil show in Las Vegas; drove through smoke from a California forest fire; discovered Ouray, Colorado, dubbed the Switzerland of America; were inspired by Sedona, Arizona; broke down in Wyoming.

Having children made it hard for Matthew Bonsall and Stephanie Small to get away.

Katherine says she'd never drive to California. "But on a motorbike you spend all the time attuned to your surroundings. You feel the wind, the minor fluctuations in temperature, the smells in the field -- some good, some bad. I really, really wanted to see that scenery on the back of the bike with Mark."

The couple, who've been together a decade, not only discovered America, however. They rediscovered themselves as well.

"Because Mark is retired, it makes me think more carefully about how to spend longer quality time with him," Katherine says. "I want to start enjoying more time with him, you know, and the trip was a great experiment."

"We might bicker in day-to-day life," she says, smiling at her husband, "but on the bike, I took my cues from you. You're a very cautious person in life. On a bike, I'm happy with that. I'm surprised at how uncomplaining I was over four weeks."

"Lovers want to get away, talk, get to know each other," says Martin Rovers, an Ottawa psychologist and marriage counsellor. "I suspect those who get away more together have better marriages."

Marilyn Belleghem, a fellow marriage and family therapist in Burlington, Ont., agrees. But, she adds, "The problem is that we forget about being each other's lover."

"And I strongly believe that when we travel, we come face to face with who we are."

One doesn't want to find out once children leave home that you don't know your partner anymore.

Quick getaways break the routine, letting couples communicate without the distractions of home and workplace, experts say. But that's easier said than done.

According to Gordon Walker, a University of Alberta leisure studies professor, the average Canadian works four hours more per week than 20 years ago.

"Just in terms of time pressure, it's not surprising people want to escape," Walker says. But those time constraints, especially among those over 45, are the biggest obstacle against doing so.

Couples seeking romantic getaways often can't spend more than a night away from home.

"People are so time-starved they can't afford more," says Judy Hammond, a Toronto-based tourism marketing expert.

Other reasons holding couples back, according to Belleghem, include "fear of intimacy, fear of cost, fear of conflict, fear of loss of control at work."

Nevertheless, says Hammond, "Those seeking balance in their lives recognize that a change of scene, a change of routine, revitalizes them."

The public appears to share that view. In September, an Ipsos Reid poll found nearly three-quarters of Canadians in a committed relationship look on vacations as "an opportunity to rekindle the fire in their relationship;" 82 per cent say vacations remind them of their partner's best qualities. The majority say their relationship improves as a result.

But the survey also shows getaways for two aren't as common as couples might like: 54 per cent of Canadian couples haven't taken a vacation with their significant other in the past year, including 16 per cent who have never taken a holiday with their partner. In a similar poll a year ago, 13 per cent said they'd never vacationed alone together.

All that may hold particularly true for couples with kids. Last month, a survey of American parents reported that nearly half would be willing to take off a week without their children. Another 23 per cent would go for a child-free night or two. But the majority admitted they'd feel guilty leaving the kids behind -- and one-third said they'd never taken a holiday alone while their children were under 18 years of age.

That doesn't surprise Vera Dyck, who wrote a thesis at the University of Guelph on couples' time together.

"Couples feel a pressure from the culture at large that they should always put the kids first," she says, "that kids have an entitlement to their parents' time."

"I'd like to see the wider culture affirm couples' needs, to pay more attention to the value to children of a loving relationship."

For a while, Stephanie Small and Matthew Bonsall were hesitant to leave their daughters Daisy, now 8, and Nettie, 6, even for a night.

"I found it impossibly hard to get away," Stephanie says. "We were encouraged by family and friends to go, but it's just who I am. I was bonding with my kids."

This was a far cry from the couple's life together before their daughters arrived. After finishing graduate school, where they met, they ventured to exotic locales for months at a time: southeast Asia, India, London, Paris.

"We really had great times together," Stephanie says.

But they've been away alone just three times since parenthood. The first was an overnight trip to Quebec City when Daisy was one; Matthew had to give a conference presentation. The other two, weekend visits to New York, happened within the past year or so.

Matthew recalls skipping out of the Quebec conference for dinner with Stephanie and feeling relaxed.

"Dinner with a one-year-old is hectic. But we probably just talked about Daisy anyway," he laughs.

By contrast, the New York trips were a whirlwind of activities they no longer do at home.

"We spent a lot of time listening to great music at the clubs, dancing, staying up late," Stephanie admits. "We came back exhausted. But we were in a magical little cocoon."

They strolled neighbourhoods and visited the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art.

"Though we take the girls to the gallery here," Matthew says, "it's a different experience. We can't go for two or three hours."

Experts suggest getaways give couples a chance to work out problems or just get to know each other better. For this couple, though, things are different. They work together in their own communications firm.

As Stephanie puts it, they talk about their lives daily, the way others talk about TV programs around the water cooler. As a result, their getaways have been focused on fun.

"It's reminiscent of our younger adventures together," Matthew says.

Family responsibilities are one reason couples don't escape. Jobs and financial responsibilities are others.

Megan Murtagh faces the problem many self-employed people do. She's the owner of a personal training studio, Bounce. Although she can theoretically take off whenever she wants, she doesn't.

"I have to go when business is slower, over Christmas and in the summer," she says.

Megan also has to take into account the workplace demands of her partner, Yanie Chauret, a climate-change analyst for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

In the 11/2 years they've been together, the couple has spent a week in Fort Lauderdale and weekends in Toronto and Sudbury.

"In Florida, our goal was to rest, be in the sun, have a good dinner with our friends," Yanie says. "We just shopped, walked around, spent a lot of time by the pool."

Because the couple is saving for a house, they're not allowing themselves to splurge.

"We tend to have a lot of friends because we're very social," Megan says. "We pretty much always have had friends wherever we've gone."

In Florida, for instance, they stayed at a condo owned by one of Megan's clients.

"For gay people, friends are probably more important than for straight people who have kids," Megan adds. "We've been through a lot with people coming out, so you spend time differently with them than with family."

By living in a small one-bedroom apartment, she adds, the women "probably already know everything about each other." But on getaways, they bring back stories -- like the time a disco ball fell on a patron's head in a Sudbury bar.

"We don't need a getaway to have a good relationship," Megan notes, "but each trip adds history to it."

Mireille and Guy Coderre say talking through challenges has always been an important part of their holidays.

"If you don't have those two days every once in a while, the problems just sit there," Mireille says. An example: conflicting child-rearing practices (Guy's the permissive one). Especially when their two children, now adults, were young, being away gave the Coderres time to talk -- and uninterrupted time in the bedroom.

Because their first child didn't arrive until many of their friends were already parents, they received advice: keep some time for themselves.

"It was not tough for me to go out for a night to a restaurant a month after they were born," Mireille recalls. Extended periods were more difficult, but Guy's mother babysat.

Financial difficulties were a deterrent, Guy says, but they kept to their budget: a 24-hour visit to New York, because that's all they could afford; a three-night cruise in the Bahamas; a stay at a Florida timeshare owned by his parents; flights on Aeroplan points.

"You always find what's really important to you," Guy says.

Their most recent trip, to celebrate Guy's 50th birthday in Palm Desert, California, was in September, when prices are lower. He wanted to rent a sports car there, but Mireille objected, citing lack of comfort and luggage space. She promised him a bottle of good wine instead.

"It's called compromise," she says.

They can afford to be more impulsive when they're travelling by themselves, too.

"One time in Quebec City, we couldn't find a place, so we slept in the car," Mireille explains. "With kids, you don't do that."

Guy says he's surprised by surveys that say couples want to get away but don't.

"If you want to be away, go."

Mireille agrees.

"That's why we're still together," she says. "Travel kept the flame alive."

Peter Johansen teaches journalism at Carleton University. His own most recent getaway with his wife was to Montreal over Labour Day weekend.

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