

Getting Away From It All

By Cameron Stracher

In the next few weeks, as spring break hits the school schedule, a lot of people will spend a whole lot of money to have a very bad time from which they will use the next few months trying to recover.

It's called "vacation," and it's anything but relaxing—or affordable. In an overheated luxury market, it requires extraordinary and unusual expenditures. Thanksgiving, Christmas, winter, spring, summer—the academic calendar is now another excuse to notch-up the competition between the haves and the have-a-lots. School's out, and parents are stressed, strapped and praying to MasterCard.

In my younger days, a vacation meant getting in the car and driving as far South from Long Island as my father could stand—which usually meant Washington or, if we were exceptionally good and he was exceptionally patient, South Carolina. Once we went to Disney World, which at the time consisted of a single theme park with four hotels. Sometimes we didn't go anywhere at all but played upstairs or down the block until our mother called us for dinner.

Now, Disney World has four theme parks and two water parks in Florida alone, 23 resorts and dozens of competitors, both in the U.S. and overseas. It sprawls over the swamps like the blob that ate Orlando. Traveling there is practically an annual ritual in the Fairfield County, Conn., town where I live, despite the fact that a week's vacation can easily cost \$1,000 a day for a family of four. One of my son's friends doesn't even want to go anymore, he's so burned out from his frequent visits.

Next week his family is flying to Aspen with the family nanny and dog. In my daughter's class, only a handful of students are not going somewhere that requires planes and hotel accommodations. Beaches Resorts offers Sesame Street themes, while Norwegian Cruise Lines has pools just for kids and a disco for teenagers. All this comes with a price, of course. A cruise or beach vacation can cost thousands of dollars for a week, depending on the destination and type of accommodations, while toting along the nanny means another airplane ticket, hotel room and even her own rental car.

Naturally, we are working harder than ever before—in part to pay for our vacations. According to the International Labor Organization, Americans average 1,979 hours at work each year, the most of any industrialized nation. We take 13 vacation days in a calendar year, while Italians

take 42 and the French take 37. Even the Germans average 35 vacation days.

But as our leisure time becomes more precious, we spend dearly to enjoy it. In fact, we spend nearly \$10,000 more on consumption each year than the average European. And with so little free time, it's only natural that we see our vacations as excuses to consume, contends Juliet Schor,

Another excuse to notch up the competition between the haves and the have-a-lots.

the author of "Do Americans Shop Too Much?" Like a child deprived of candy, we have a sweet tooth. We work so we can spend, and spend to reward ourselves for working. Can you say "vicious circle"?

But there is another explanation for our extravagant vacations. It's not a race to the top, exactly, but a race to imitate the top. The middle class may be feeling squeezed, but those at the higher reaches

scribed, there are four groups that specialize in trips up the mountain. (Alpine Ascents International, for example, offers a 64-day trek for \$65,000.)

When the rich are buying more, and spending more, everyone else feels poorer by comparison. Thus we have the "trickle down" theory of vacations. When my classmates stayed home, it was OK to drive to Washington with my family. But when everyone is jetting off somewhere, my kids feel deprived when I suggest we get in the car and go see the Washington Monument. They want to go to Disney World, which I suppose should make me thankful. At least they don't want to ski in Gstaad. Not yet, anyway.

But why must we spend vacations "vacationing"? Who decreed that these breaks from the academic calendar must be spent spending money, seeking new adventures, amusing children?

Why do we work so hard to have fun? Although most Americans claim that they would trade money for more free time, I suspect they don't really mean it. We wouldn't know what to do with 35 days of vacation. That's seven weeks cooped up with the children and spouse, forced to share meals, bedtime, the same physical space. This fear of small spaces and people is why so many people are happy to return to work on Monday and why so many of us will come back from spring break exhausted, cranky and needing a vacation.

We are a busy nation because we do not know what to do with our free time. Instead we treat it with the same manic industriousness that we bring to the rest of our lives. As our jobs become more cluttered by cellphones, BlackBerrys, voice mail and e-mail, free time has become another thing we measure according to its productivity. We over-plan and over-hype vacations because we just don't know how to shut ourselves off. When it comes to going away with our children, we try to cram as much as possible into the shortest time available, as if efficiency mattered to the elementary-school set.

My father had the right idea. He drove only as long as he could stomach our demands. Then he pulled off the road—usually into a Holiday Inn. But I have an even better plan: This spring break, I'm not going to Disney World. I'm staying in bed and letting my kids drive the car.

Mr. Stracher is the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review and special counsel to Media / Professional Insurance.



Martin Kozlowski

of the income pyramid are spending freely on vacations—both in absolute terms and as a percentage of income. According to Robert H. Frank, an economist at Cornell and the author of "Luxury Fever," there is an "arms race" of sorts among consumers of luxury goods, many of whom view the things they consume not as luxuries but rather as necessities dictated by their incomes. ("I need this Audi A8," a friend of mine is fond of saying.)

In the quest for new experiences, and the desire to avoid the familiar, the wealthy have been driven to profligate getaways. "Everyone wants to have a good time," Mr. Frank says. "If you've done it before, it's not that much fun to do it again." Thus, as Mr. Frank notes, the number of people seeking "experience" vacations is rising. Years ago, no one would have considered climbing Mount Everest as a vacation, nor would he have brought along a cappuccino machine. Now, as Jon Krakauer has de-