

On the Road Again



You've heard the word "staycation." Because times are tight, now is the perfect time to take one – to the benefit of both your chi and your checkbook.

Joseph P. Kennedy, father of President John F. Kennedy, famously said, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Well, times are, indeed, tough, and people are, in fact, going.

They're just not going quite so far from home, according to Matt Wixon, author of "The Great American Staycation: How to Make a Vacation at Home Fun for the Whole Family (and Your Wallet!)." Once tempted to outdo themselves with bigger and better trips every year – to Hawaii, the Caribbean and Europe – Wixon says travelers now are downsizing their vacations to match the downsized economy.

"With the economy struggling, and many people either losing their jobs or worrying about that possibility, people are frightened to splurge on a vacation," he says.

It's because of that fear, however, that people still need vacations. They need a break – however brief – from the headlines and the stock quotes in order to focus on family and fun, respite and relaxation. They need a distraction, and they're finding it for less in their own backyard, where the so called staycation is king.

"Staying close to home is certainly more affordable, more convenient and less stressful," Wixon says. "But it can also be as satisfying as a traditional vacation. The key is being creative, planning ahead and treating it like a real vacation."

Bliss on a Budget

If you live in the Midwest, right about now is when your surroundings are finally starting to thaw for the summer that's ahead. It's warm, green and dry again – and after months indoors, you're probably itching to get out.

You can, even if you're pinching pennies, insists budget traveler Jody Halsted, who writes about her family trips on her blog, "Have Kid Will Travel." Like the mighty Mississippi that cuts vertically through it, she says the Midwest is running over in places with affordable things to see and do.

"Summer is the best time to live in the Midwest. Why leave then?" asks Halsted. "There is so much to do. Every town, no matter how small, has something – if you take the time to look."

Indeed, whether you like sightseeing or spas, roughing it or relaxing, an affordable summer staycation is waiting for you somewhere close to home. Consider, for instance, the following budget-friendly ideas for escaping to and within the Midwest:

1. Be a Hometown Tourist

Although she's a global traveler, Halsted stays local when money's tight. "We don't travel far from home in the summer, as it's the most expensive time to do so," she says.

Instead, Halsted spends her summers enjoying her hometown, a good option that can save travelers a lot of money, according to Mary Bergin, a Madison, WI-based travel writer who pens a syndicated column called "Roads Traveled."

"Typical tourist attractions, especially in larger urban areas, have free-admission days," Bergin says. "If you live in or near the area where you were raised as a child, think about field trip destinations you might have forgotten."

Tourists from other parts of the country often pay big money to visit the same Midwest attractions that locals ignore. Good options, according to Wixon, include museums, zoos, sporting events, theaters, fairs and festivals, not to mention "tourist traps" that you've never been trapped by. Chicago locals, for instance, might consider visiting the top of the Willis Tower (formerly the Sears Tower) or taking an architectural boat tour on the Chicago River.

If you live in northwest Indiana, you might consider visiting the Indiana Dunes, taking in a Gary Railcats baseball game, or visiting the Indiana Beach Amusement Park. If you live near the Quad Cities, options include visiting the Figge Art Museum, attending the John Deere Classic Golf Tournament in June or going to the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival in July.

In order to make the day feel more like a vacation, Bergin suggests visiting several attractions in the same day and taking public transportation between them.

While you're at it, consult the local convention and visitors bureau for recommendations; it's there to help tourists and can be a great resource.

2. Burn Some Rubber

If getting away to you means getting out of town, look to Midwest destinations that are within a day's drive of your home, Halsted suggests.

Good options, according to Wixon, are outlet malls, amusement parks, wineries, national landmarks, factory tours and historic sites. In Illinois, you can visit Abraham Lincoln's home and burial site, or the Abraham Lincoln Library and Museum, in Springfield, or Six Flags Great Escape north of Chicago. In St. Louis, which is about a six-hour drive from Chicago and northwest Indiana, you can take a ride aboard a riverboat on the Mississippi River. And in southeastern Wisconsin, you can take a tour of the Jelly Belly jellybean factory.

If you want to get even further out of town, take the train. Aboard Amtrak, you can often cover a greater distance at a fraction of the cost compared with flying or even driving.

3. Explore the Great Outdoors

Although it's typically close to home, the outdoors can feel like it's a world away, Wixon says. "Outdoor activities are a great option," he says, "because they are generally inexpensive and truly break you out of your daily routine."

Camping, hiking and fishing are all great options – especially at state parks, according to Bergin. Vermillion County Illinois offers numerous parks such as Kennekuk County Park. Set on 3,000 acres and very close to the Middle Fork National Scenic River, Middle Fork State Wildlife Area and Kickapoo State Park, Kennekuk is close to Danville and Champaign.

"Outdoors" doesn't have to mean sweat and sleeping bags, either. Other good options are horseback riding, waterskiing, biking, golfing and even harvesting in places like Michigan, where you can visit farms in order to pick your own cherries, apples, peaches and pears.

If you yearn for the coast, head to the Great Lakes, where there are miles of beaches in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. You can rent a boat or even take a cruise to Canada. Although it's not the Caribbean, you'll be able to enjoy all the typical cruiseship amenities for a fraction of the cost.

4. Splurge in Small Doses

If you're used to five-star travel, staying close to home can afford you big luxury at a smaller price point, Wixon says.

"If you calculate how much you'll save by forgoing the traditional vacation, you can take half of that or a third of that, depending on your budget, and apply it to your vacation," he says.

For instance, take half of the money you might have spent on plane tickets and spend it on one or two nights at a local resort; because you'll be saving on travel costs, you can afford to splurge on accommodations, meals and spa treatments.

Among the Midwest's most luxurious destinations are the American Club in Kohler, WI; the Eaglewood Resort & Spa in Itasca, IL; and Chateau on the Lake Resort in Branson, MO.

If a resort is still too pricey, consider booking a night at a local hotel or treating yourself to a nice dinner. "Indulge in small ways," Bergin says, "like a fancy dessert at a four-star restaurant after eating at home or having a picnic. Figure out what gives you joy that is not expensive. Realize that time – spent with someone you love, or away from the stresses of work – can be more valuable than money."

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