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Your Backyard Vacation

JULY 2008

by Matt Alderton

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If you ask most Americans, there's a lot to get away from this summer: politics, global warming, inflation. The list goes on and on.

Topping it, of course, are concerns about energy, employment, health care and homes, according to a survey of more than 2,000 adults conducted this spring by the Kaiser Family Foundation. It reports that for 44 percent of Americans, paying for gasoline is a "serious problem."

Coupled with a weak dollar and struggling airlines, those concerns will likely impact families' summer travel budgets this year, according to IBISWorld Inc., a Los Angeles-based industry intelligence firm. In its 2008 Tourism in the U.S. report, it projects a 1.4 percent decline in domestic tourism revenues.

"The squeeze on domestic family budgets and the related declines in consumer confidence are the principle swing variables affecting our declining revenue forecast," says George Van Horn, senior analyst for IBISWorld. "This may indeed be one of the few periods in the recent past where travel spending actually declines for a short period of time."

An Affordable Alternative

Reduced spending doesn't have to mean reduced summer fun, however. In fact, a tight budget is a welcome excuse to spend more time at home, where low-key vacations are not only more affordable than cross-continent excursions, but often more attractive.

"When you do actually travel, there's a lot of anxiety and disappointment that comes with that because everything has to follow a certain schedule," says Chris Peeples, president and founder of Vixen Hill, an Elverson, Pa.-based manufacturer of modular poolside structures. "You're almost guaranteed to have a more predictably enjoyable time at home than you are on a speculative trip to a faraway land."

Pool owner Kathy Peterson agrees. A Tequesta, Fla.-based celebrity design expert, author and TV personality, she often finds herself escaping to her pool in the middle of a busy workday, when she needs a vacation most. "When you go on a vacation, the money's gone," she says. "All you've got is photographs and souvenirs."

If you spend your summer travel budget on backyard upgrades instead, Peterson suggests, you'll have more than souvenirs: You'll have a permanent, year-round vacation destination.

Your Poolside Paradise

With the high cost of travel this summer, you might get more bang for your buck by investing in your backyard. Whether your idea of the quintessential summer vacation is at a family-friendly theme park, an exclusive spa or an exotic resort, with a little inspiration you can transform the area in and around your pool into the perfect plan B. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Create a private resort:** With a few additions, your swimming pool can rival any resort, Peeples says. To create relaxing backyard real estate, he suggests investing in a poolside gazebo, pergola or cabana, which can be divided into separate areas for changing rooms, a bar, etc.
- **Bring the spa to you:** If a resort setting isn't enough, Peterson says, consider indulging in resort services, too. She recommends hiring a masseuse, for instance, for an at-home massage beside the pool. Or consider investing in an outdoor shower for a unique spa-like experience — without the spa price tag.
- **Enjoy five-star dining:** If your favorite part about vacations isn't relaxing at the spa, but indulging your palette at four- and five-star restaurants, then Peeples suggests building an outdoor kitchen where you can prepare your own gourmet creations. A grill, refrigerator, sink, bar and prep area are all possible, and you can create further five-star ambiance by installing an outdoor audio system, romantic outdoor lighting or a fire pit.
- **Throw the ultimate pool party:** Outdoor lighting, music and food will also help you entertain, says Katonah, New York -based event planner and hospitality consultant Alison Minton, president of Maplemint Enterprises Inc. She suggests organizing regular pool parties with themed food, decorations and dress so that friends and extended family can join you on your backyard vacation.
- **Entertain the kids:** Although a week at a popular theme park is great, a swimming pool can also occupy your children for an entire summer, Minton says. To create a kid-friendly getaway, consider populating your pool with plenty of inflatable toys, including rafts and floats. For older kids — and grown-up ones — consider inflatable game tables like pool pong and even inflatable blackjack.

No matter how you spend your summer, don't mourn the loss of your family trip if you can't afford to take it. Instead, start some new backyard traditions. "It's a week at the beach," Minton says, "versus an entire summer of nice weather at home."