



Just When You Thought It Was Safe to Skip Vacation...

Americans leave a collective 170 million vacay days on the table each year. Yet research shows that not getting away could literally be life-threatening. Our unplug/relax/recharge guide will convince you, finally, to put "taking time off" at the top of your to-do list.

Reported by Jayme Moye



For the next few weeks,

France—like, the entire country—will be on vacation (it's called *les grandes vacances*). But odds are you won't be joining them. Because stateside, we're a no-vacation nation. Hell, we don't even have *vacation days* anymore; it's all PTO, or "paid time off," a joyless, unsexy lumping together of sick and personal days that we're not even using. More than 40 percent of Americans didn't take a single day off last year, according to travel website Skift.com. Those who did step away from work used only half of their allotted time.

Fear keeps some of us shackled to our desks: One survey found 40 percent of us stress about coming back to mountains of work; 22 percent worry that no one else will be able to do our jobs—or worse, that they will (a fifth of folks fear they'll be seen as replaceable). Which may be why 61 percent of us cop to checking work e-mail when we do go away.

Others are "vacation shamed" by coworkers—or even themselves. "People often carry their own guilt about taking time off and project negative self-judgment onto what really is a healthy choice," says clinical psychologist Christopher Willard, Psy.D., a lecturer at Harvard Medical School and author of *Growing Up Mindful*.

Let's pause on that last part. Because taking time off is crucial for good health. Research shows women who go on regular vacations are up to three times less likely to be depressed and have half the risk of experiencing a heart attack than their nonvacationing counterparts. Breaking free can even help you get ahead professionally: Studies show it enhances creativity and mental resilience, amps productivity, and can up your odds of being promoted.

So we're calling shenanigans on the no-vacay nonsense. To make sure you don't let another year slip by without an official vacation (and its mind-body perks), we asked top well-being and travel experts for their best tips to make the most of your trip. Get ready to get away—and come back happier, saner, even healthier.

YEAH, STAYCATION RHYMES WITH VACATION. BUT THE SIMILARITIES END THERE. THE \$\$\$ YOU SAVE IS NEVER WORTH THE LETDOWN. GOTTA DO CHORES? WANT AN AFTERNOON AT THE SPA? TAKE A DAY OFF. MAKE VACATIONS FOR AN ACTUAL WEEK AWAY.

Change for the Better

When you're trying to escape your to-do list, the last thing you want is a to-do list. But experts say there are tiny things you can do while you're away to return in a better state than when you left. To come back...

Calmer

Each morning, do a five-minute sensory meditation. Immersing yourself in the surrounding sensations, sounds, and smells provides a lasting relaxed feeling.

More Rested

Sleeping in disrupts your circadian rhythms, leaving you groggy. Catch up on Zs with a 20- to 40-minute nap around 3 p.m., when your natural alertness dips.

The Best-Laid Plans

One of the happiest parts of a trip is—oddly enough—the planning (science says so!). Follow this timeline to milk the joy out of every before-you-go second, then keep the good vibes flowing when you return. —Lisa Fields

→ T (trip) minus 3 months Build buzz.

Anticipation lights up your brain's prefrontal cortex, the area linked to positive thinking. To keep it humming, do an activity related to your trip, like reading a novel set in your destination or cooking a local dish, every few weeks. For maximum effect, involve your traveling companion; you'll feed off each other's excitement, says Jaime Kurtz, Ph.D., a James Madison University happiness researcher.

→ T-2 months Book it!

Saving money triggers a rush of feel-good endorphins—and you'll knock about 7 percent off your U.S. hotel room if you lock it in now, per travel planning and booking site TripAdvisor (three to five months is the sweet spot for the Caribbean and Europe). At exactly 54 days out, nab airline tickets; online booking agency CheapAir ID'd this as the magic number for getting the best deal on domestic flights (international fares are cheaper even further out).

→ T-1 month Schedule activities.

Looking to horseback-ride or scuba dive? Paying for excursions early amplifies enjoyment. "By separating the payment from the moment, you're less likely to think about the cost," says University of Chicago happiness researcher Amit Kumar, Ph.D.

→ T-3 weeks Make dinner reservations.

An OpenTable poll found 22 percent of people book at least two weeks out; beat them to the punch now to snag prime time (7 p.m. to 9 p.m.) seating. Scrambling for a last-minute table can cause a spike in stress hormones, which may keep you from fully enjoying your meal.

→ T-2 weeks Get your house in order.

Household-related stress (e.g., lining up a pet sitter) typically peaks one week before vacation, says Dutch tourism researcher Jeroen Nawijn, Ph.D. Nip it by starting early.

→ T-2 days Pack your bags.

Any more than that and you risk stowing away items you may need before you go (what happened to all my undies?). Don't pack the day before; there won't be enough time for last-minute laundry or a drugstore Dramamine run.

→ VACATION!!

→ T+1 day Ease into the ordinary.

A frantic day will make you long for yesterday's chill. One study says: Return on a Thursday or Friday to create a natural buffer.

→ T+2 days Chat up a friend.

Dish the highlights of your trip to a pal. Research suggests both of you will reap bliss from the conversation, says Kumar.

→ T+2 weeks after Make a trip album.

That Zen will have started to deflate. Reminiscing activates the prefrontal cortex, prompting an uptick in happiness.

Fitter

If you regularly strength train, do yoga. Yogi? Run. You'll engage your muscles in new ways, priming them to break through to next-level fitness when you return.

Slimmer

Over 1 million travelers reported shedding weight while away. To join them, walk whenever possible. It's a great way to take in the sights and burn cal.

Sources: Christopher Willard, Psy.D., author of *Growing Up Mindful*; Carol Ash, D.O., board-certified sleep specialist; Scott Weiss, D.P.T., C.S.C.S., exercise physiologist; Lisa C. Andrews, R.D., owner of Sound Bites Nutrition, LLC

Unplug for Reals

For Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post* and author of *The Sleep Revolution*, vacation is serious business: When a HuffPo employee takes PTO, an opt-in system automatically deletes e-mails sent their way. (Don't worry—the sender is informed.) Company not quite that forward-thinking? Try Huffington's other tactics for disengaging from the job.

Set a firm out-of-office.

"Here's one I used during a recent vacation to Hawaii: *I'm sorry I can't respond to your e-mail right away. I've put myself on a seven-day digital diet, unplugging and disconnecting from my devices so I can recharge and reconnect with myself and my family. I promise to get back to you as soon as I break the fast.* No one will pay attention to this if you start responding to e-mails—I've been guilty of this myself. Resist the urge."

Establish reachability expectations.

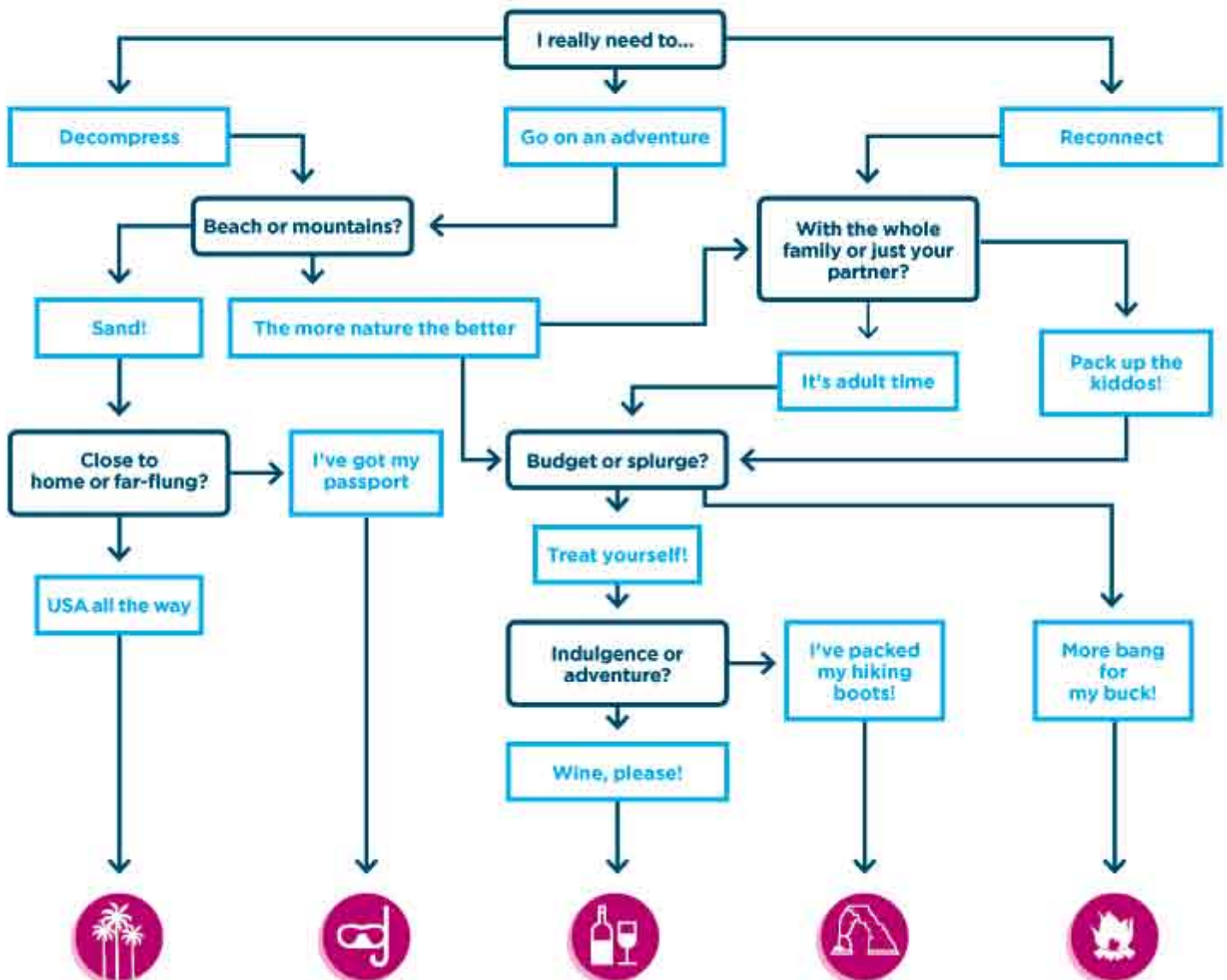
"On trips where I can't totally disconnect, my team knows I'll touch base for a few minutes once in the morning and again in the evening. Decide how often you'll check in, and communicate this to relevant coworkers. It'll make everyone's lives easier—and your vacation that much more enjoyable."

Keep your traveling partners in the loop.

"In Hawaii, my family was aware of which times I'd set aside for work. There were no hard feelings since they knew for the rest of the trip I'd be engrossed in whatever we were doing together."

Choose Your Own Adventure

One destination doesn't fit all schedules—or all dispositions. For max merriment, you need to find the break that will refresh *you*. Colleen Clark, *Travel + Leisure* writer (she's journeyed from Nashville to Namibia and to 40 other countries), plays vacation matchmaker.



Los Angeles
Soak up contemporary art at the new (and free!) Broad Museum. Dine on Korean-inspired cuisine at The Line Hotel's rooftop greenhouse. Take the recently built light-rail to Santa Monica. Walk to Venice Beach (stop for a green juice at The Butcher's Daughter).

Bermuda
Splurge on a stay at Elbow Beach, with its private sands and snorkeling reef. Swim through caves at Walsingham Nature Reserve. Replenish with the cornbread and cassava madeleines at Marcus's at Hamilton Princess & Beach Club hotel.

Bordeaux, France
Loved-up foodies can't miss the new La Cité du Vin wine museum and eatery Belle Campagne (a locavore bistro). Then head to The Vinothérapie Spa at Les Sources de Caudalie Hotel; the grape-based treatments will crush any lingering stress.

Utah
Take the fam to Utah's National Parks (they turn 100 this year!). Start at the natural bridges of Arches National Park, then take on mild Colorado River rapids near Moab. Drive to Bryce Canyon, where you can bed down in a giant teepee at Ruby's Inn.

Iceland
Soak in mineral-rich geothermal waters at the Blue Lagoon Spa in Reykjavik. Hole up at the nearby Hotel Budir, a beachfront lodge with glacier views. Swim just outside the door in summer; be wowed by the northern lights if you visit from October through March.

Easy Riders

Notice anything about the above itineraries? They don't cram in too much. That's because research shows organizing a jam-packed sightseeing schedule stresses out 74 percent of people. If even these trips feel frazzle-inducing, try the slow-travel trend, a quality-over-quantity mindset. "Think of it as living like a local who has plenty of leisure time," says Sarah Schlichter, a senior editor at IndependentTraveler.com. Say you're spending a week in San Francisco. Rent an apartment instead of a hotel (try airbnb.com or vrbo.com) and explore the neighborhood: One day you might stop by the local café for coffee and a croissant, then meander around the open-air farmers' market for ingredients for that night's dinner. Or spend a few hours reading at a local park, followed by one attraction you really want to see. Who needs a Golden Gate Bridge selfie anyway?



Planes, Trains, and Automobiles

Nothing quashes anticipatory glee—and ratchets up stress—like cramped seats, long lines, and bland meals. Julia Cosgrove, vice president and editor-in-chief of travel media brand AFAR (she averages 23 trips per year!), explains how to make the getting there (nearly) as good for you as the actual vacation.



Flying

- "If I'm choosing between airlines, I use seatguru.com for details that might not show up on the airline's website—for example; the tray table is in the armrest, which reduces the seat's width. If you didn't score the best spot when booking, ask if anything better is available when you check in, and again when you get to the gate. Seats are constantly shifting right up until boarding, so be the squeaky wheel."

- "Global Entry, which gives you TSA Precheck status, is worth it if you fly six or more times a year. You will skip the majority of airport security lines, get to keep your shoes on and your liquids and laptop in your

bag, and can sail right through customs if you're returning from abroad. It costs \$100 for a five-year membership—a 15-minute interview with Homeland Security is also required—but I can't tell you how much time I've saved and how many hassles I've avoided using the service."

- "We Americans are oddly averse to travel insurance, but it can often save the day if an emergency comes up and you have to change your plans. I recommend World Nomads, an Australia-based company. I'm also a fan of tweeting directly to the customer service Twitter handle of an airline if there's a delay or you need to rebook. Most respond instantly."



Driving

- "If you're going to rent a car, pick a company and establish loyalty to save time and money—your preferences are on file, so you'll avoid at-counter upsells. I use Hertz in the U.S. and Sixt in Europe. While traveling internationally, spring for the GPS; your phone's navigation system may work but can rack up roaming charges."



Train Travel

- "Food is hit-or-miss on trains, so I pack a picnic. I recently took a high-speed train between Milan and Rome. We picked up grilled vegetables, cheeses, bread, and arancini [rice balls] before boarding and had a feast."

Sick Leave

Sanjay Gupta, M.D., chief medical correspondent for CNN, has traveled to every continent. How he avoids new illnesses like Zika, as well as more common health-zappers.

Food Poisoning

"I've eaten some great meals from food carts. To avoid unsanitary ones, go where locals flock; they don't eat at vendors known for making people sick. For hotel buffets, I take Anthony Bourdain's advice and skip ones with a variety of multicultural foods. The chance the staff knows how to properly cook every item is pretty slim."

Bedbugs

"Check the bed frame, sheets, headboard, and pillows for the apple seed-size insects. At home, unpack directly into the laundry, drying on high heat to kill the critters. Use a brush attachment on your vacuum for your luggage. Once the bugs take hold, they're hard to get rid of."

Insect-Carried Illnesses

"In low-risk areas—check cdc.gov—I use a bug spray with 10 percent DEET, but if I'm in, say, the Congo, I use a 25 percent concentration. Don't just apply at dusk; both Zika and chikungunya (an illness that wreaks havoc on joints) come from daytime biters."

Sunburn

"Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen with SPF 30, especially in spots where the sun's rays are reflected off water or snow—I once had the underside of my nose burn while skiing! Also in locations close to the equator, where more direct sunlight passes through the atmosphere."

Local Diseases

"When a tsunami hit Sri Lanka, I flew out to report on the increased malaria risk—but didn't have time to get a malaria prophylaxis first. Don't make the same mistake. A travel health specialist—find one at istm.org—can tell you which vaccinations you need." ■