

Vacation: Not What You Remember

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On the final morning of their vacation in Cancun, Mexico, Ed Diener drove his daughter Marissa to the airport while his wife Carol stayed behind in their seventh-floor hotel room to shower and prepare for their own later flight. When Carol came from her shower, wearing only a towel wrapped around her hair, she found a stranger standing there.

“They thought we had skipped out without paying and somehow had left the room locked [from inside],” Ed explained. A hotel employee had climbed onto a seventh-floor ledge from an adjoining room and made his way to the Dieners’.

Carol managed to chase the intruder away, but “I remember nothing else about this vacation,” said Ed.

APS Fellow Diener, whose research specialty is well-being, used the Cancun story to underscore a key point about vacations: They are seldom the way we remember them.

“It was probably 99 percent pleasant moments,” explained Diener, who is at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, “but I never want to go back to Cancun again. One brief moment ruined the entire vacation in my memory, despite the many fun moments I undoubtedly had prior to the event.”

Idealized Image

“I think all of us walk around with an image of the good life,” said APS Fellow George Loewenstein, Carnegie Mellon University. “Different people have radically different images of what the good life is, and for many, when we go on vacation, we are trying to create a life that resembles what we think of as the good life. It’s not really important what we do, as long as it fits into that idealized image.”

Then reality intervenes: muggy weather, mosquitoes, sunburn, long lines, pesky children. And when it’s over, we regale friends and family with tales of fun and adventure, good and bad.

That’s another thing about vacations. “The worst experiences often make the best memories,” Loewenstein said. Or, as Diener put it, “Some vacations are miserable, but lead to great stories.”

“People expect vacations to be wonderful and derive a lot of pleasure from anticipating them,” said Loewenstein, “which is just as well, because the reality is often much less ideal than the images. Vacations are doomed to never measure up. In retrospect, fortunately, our minds play games with us, and they reassemble themselves often into something that is pretty close to what we expected. [Later] people remember the highs and lows, but the main thing they really remember is meaning. ‘That was the trip on which I met my wife.’ ‘That was the trip on which I almost drowned.’”

The Rosy View

As a former mountain climber, Loewenstein often uses mountaineering to explain what might be the

biggest paradox about vacation travel — why we keep going back for more despite disappointment. (See below for his own “most memorable” mountain climb.)

“People return to the miseries of the mountains over and over,” he said, “in part, because they can’t remember the misery of being cold, hungry, exhausted, and terrified. Mountaineers are acutely aware of this, but it doesn’t help.” No matter how much they remember that they were miserable on previous climbs, they cannot remember what those miseries actually felt like.

That accounts in part for the “rosy view,” a term coined by Terence Mitchell, University of Washington, APS Fellow Leigh Thompson, Northwestern University, and their colleagues. This “rosy view” refers to the view of vacations as enjoyable experiences, despite the many obstacles and frustrations they sometimes present.

They found that “rosy view” reflected in three distinctly different vacation scenarios during the 1990s. Travelers on a 10-day European tour expected to enjoy themselves much more than they actually did, and later remembered it as being more enjoyable than they said it was at the time.

The same was true for students home for Thanksgiving and for students on a three-week California bicycling tour. For example, only 5 percent of the bicyclers expected to be disappointed beforehand, but 61 percent said they were disappointed during the trip. Then, as early as a week later, only 11 percent remembered they’d been disappointed.

Rewriting the Past

More recently, APS Fellow Derrick Wirtz, along with Diener and others at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, found the same among 46 students on spring break: Their predicted and remembered experiences were both more positive and, paradoxically, more negative than the experiences themselves.

Why? In addition to memory’s inability to evoke past pain and other emotions, during vacations “people face a barrage of minor distractions, neither anticipated or remembered, that dilute the experience of enjoyment,” Mitchell reported in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. “People [also] felt less in control ... [and] saw themselves less positively during the event than they either anticipated or remembered.”

His team’s conclusion: “We may choose to go on vacations, or participate in events, partly because we know we will enjoy the anticipation and recollection for a longer time than the event itself.”

The spring break findings also explain why mountain climbers keep going back for more: “Remembered experience ... directly predicted the desire to repeat the experience,” Wirtz wrote in *Psychological Science*. “These results suggest that although online measures may be superior to retrospective measures for approximating objective experience, retrospective measures may be superior for predicting choice.”

The rosy view has a down side as well. “Rosy mechanisms may help to explain why people often seem to repeat the mistakes of the past,” Mitchell cautioned. “Constantly rewriting the past in a favorable light may mean we don’t adjust to the demands of the future.”

Are Vacations Good for You?

Not only do we not remember vacation experiences accurately, we don't even take the vacations we say we want, Loewenstein found. "The idea of travel looms large in the American psyche. People always talk about how much they will travel when they retire or recover from sickness, but the vast majority of Americans do pitifully little of it."

In a longitudinal study of kidney transplant patients, Loewenstein, along with Peter Ubel, University of Michigan, and Christopher Jepson, University of Pennsylvania, found that "the most dramatic misprediction had to do with travel." Before their transplants the patients predicted that a year later they would travel 27 days a year. After a year, they reported traveling only 11 days.

Academics, Loewenstein said, are no exception. "One of the main benefits [in academia] is all the time off, long summer vacations and winter vacations, but looking at the academics I know, it's amazing how many don't take advantage. They turn the best job in the world into a mediocre job."

The whole point of taking a vacation, of course, is to escape the daily stresses of life and recharge our internal batteries. But are vacations truly healthful?

"We really don't know the answer to this," said Brooks Gump, State University of New York-Oswego. Gump, with Karen Matthews, University of Pittsburgh, conducted a nine-year Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial (MRFIT) that tracked 12,338 middle-aged men at high risk for coronary heart disease.

One of the things the researchers asked was whether the men had taken a vacation the previous year. It turned out that those who took more vacations had a lower risk of dying and, more specifically, of dying of heart disease. "Vacationing," they wrote, "may be good for your health."

Gump has also examined the effects of vacations on nurses. He found that the better their vacations, the better their mental health and the lower their emotional exhaustion. The results, however, suggest this may be due less to the benefits of good vacations than to the cost of poor ones. "Vacations may be good overall," Gump cautions, "but this may include a subgroup with poor-quality vacations and therefore no benefit."

Vacations and Well-Being

Also, association doesn't indicate causation. "It is unlikely that the one or two weeks of vacation alone affect health," Gump said. It could be that simply planning a vacation buffers current stressors, or "those who take a vacation ... [have] other behaviors that all impact physical health," such as taking breaks during the workday and not taking work home.

"We have very little understanding of this," Loewenstein said, "because our measures of well-being are so questionable. A hint that vacations might not, in fact, be so important is that Americans get little vacation time ... [compared to people in other countries], yet come out quite high in international comparisons of self-reported happiness."

Gerhard Strauss-Blasche, of the Medical University of Vienna, said that in Austria, "We generally assume that people feel better and are more rested after vacation," but added this may be "uncommon" in the United States, where vacation habits differ.

In any event, the healthful effects don't last long. "Although it has been shown in several studies that a respite from work decreases burnout and improves mood and physical well-being," Strauss-Blasche said, "these effects just last for a few weeks, if that long."

His research team did find that spa therapy produced "remarkably long-lasting effects — up to a year," and that a three-week hiking vacation "improved positive and negative mood and subjective health as well as physiological measures like blood pressure," benefits that lasted at least seven weeks.

Among factors contributing to the perceived health benefits, "Vacation satisfaction plays a crucial role," according to Strauss-Blasche. "Satisfied vacationers show the greatest improvements of mood and well-being, whereas people not satisfied with their vacation tend to show less or no improvement of well-being. So, 'bad' vacations will not be good for us."

Vacation Stress

Vacations can themselves be stressful, Strauss-Blasche pointed out. Long distance travel, whether by plane or in traffic, adapting to new physical and social environments, even having the family around all day can produce stress, especially for the first day or so.

When Australian researchers analyzed the diaries of 48 tourists visiting tropical islands, they found that negative moods peaked on the second and third days of the holiday. And Ad J. J. M. Vingerhoets, Tilberg University, the Netherlands, found that middle aged men with a well-known cardiovascular risk profile had increased risk of myocardial infarction during the first two days of vacation travel.

"The best part of travel is also the worst part of travel," Loewenstein said. "Both stem from its inherent unpredictability. We never know what's going to be around the next bend, which can make travel much more exciting than daily life: Anything can happen. But, that's exactly the problem and the reason so many find travel terrifying: Anything can happen."

Travel, Loewenstein said, is "one of the many ways in life in which you can only get the best if you are willing to risk the worst." Experiencing Venice in Las Vegas or riding a roller coaster may give you simulated risk, the former mountaineer added, "but for real thrills, there is no substitute for actually putting your life on the line. Of course, the problem is, if you do, you very well might lose it."

Foreign travel can be particularly challenging. "As a tourist in another country," Vingerhoets pointed out, "you may feel a bit out of control, because you do not know the language and the customs. You also have to play another role. You are no longer the boss or the employee. Nobody knows you, they approach you in a different way. You have to adjust to the totally new environment. And adjustment and lack of control are well known as stress-enhancing factors." Yet another likely reason it may be a blessing is that we don't remember vividly the stresses of our vacations.

Other than satisfaction, the most important factor in vacation well-being is "to have enough time for one's self and one's needs," said Strauss-Blasche. "When vacation does not have this quality of self-determination, vacation satisfaction is low and vacation outcome poor. Vacationers need to think about what they would like to do during vacation, what their own needs and wishes are, and not believe they have to conform to some 'holiday standard' or the travel agency's ideas."

Bad Trip

Vacations are not only unpredictable, they are also “inherently ambiguous,” Loewenstein said. A trip to the Grand Canyon, for example, might have included not only the awe-inspiring view but also rising before dawn, a long wait at a crowded airport for a delayed flight, lost luggage, and a tiring drive in a cumbersome mobile home. Was the trip good or bad?

“It seems to me that the answer depends completely on how you weight the different experiences, how you add them up,” Loewenstein said. “How do you value memories? How do you value being changed in some way as a person? Maybe this unavoidable ambiguity is one of the reasons we don’t learn much from experience, because it’s so arbitrary how we encode the experience, and we know this at some level.”

Anyway, Loewenstein said, “If a trip turns out to be miserable, you can always chalk it up to a growth experience.”

Sooner or later, the wanderer must return home, where resumption of everyday chores can be stressful and, as Strauss-Blasche found, bring on at least a temporary setback in well-being.

And therein lies the vacationers’ final paradox, said Loewenstein: “The misprediction and biased recall of vacations is perhaps only surpassed by the misprediction and biased recall of home when one is on vacation.”

Miles from home, it is family life that takes on an idealized glow. “We forget the fights with our spouse, the trials with our children, the endless chores, and our bed at home suddenly seems infinitely comfortable and comforting,” he said. “Within hours of returning, of course, there is the inevitable ‘why was I so anxious to get back home?’”

References

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