



# Are we The ever illusive perfect family holiday **THERE YET?**

BY LEONARD CARR



**ON ARRIVAL AS A VOLUNTEER PROFESSIONAL AT** a youth camp, I was immediately struck by a startling reality. The conspicuous joy and delight on the faces of the children were in direct inverse proportion to the dilapidation and griminess of the campsite. Fast forward to the last day of camp, when the campsite was deserted and a van from the local welfare was trying to enter the site. I walked up to the van and told them they were a day late. They had in fact arrived to collect the abandoned clothing and other items that, for most of the children, were easier to replace when they got home rather than taking care to pack them.

Since the moment I had children, I have harboured this fantasy of a family holiday where parents and children bonded through adventure and sharing wonderful activities, like spending hours in the sea, getting up at the crack of dawn for a hike, and squeezing every moment out of the expensive beyond-our-means experience. It always seemed so worth the money for

the closeness and great bonding memories we'd take home. The only thing I didn't bargain for was that I'm the only one who likes the beach, gets up early or has any interest in hiking, and cares about wasting the day. Who would have believed that a three-hour drive to see elephants, including the awesome experience of chancing upon a herd of about 40 of my favourite creatures, would be shattered by a backseat chorus of "when are we getting something to drink". Watching the baby elephants frolicking in the waterhole inspired the children to nothing but thirst. I know I'm not alone when I express chagrin at driving through the beautiful Outeniqua and noticing that my enthusiastic commentary is being met with silence because the children in the back seat are playing on cell phones and ignoring the scenery.

Then there was the dilemma of having children in different ages and stages: how do you keep them all happy? Which age group do you cater to? Did my wife and I need to spend my time of recovery and rest from a stressful year being overworked, underappreciated entertainment officers trying to satisfy diverse needs in confined places with limited resources.

These and many other experiences brought me to a startling realisation: what is often meant as family bonding time can

“THESE AND MANY OTHER EXPERIENCES BROUGHT ME TO A STARTLING REALISATION: WHAT IS OFTEN MEANT AS FAMILY BONDING TIME CAN END UP BEING FAMILY BONDAGE TIME.”

PHOTOGRAPH: BIGSTOCKPHOTO.COM; PORTRAIT: SUPPLIED

end up being family bondage time. This epiphany took place literally within minutes of arriving at camp. I kept this perception in the background of my consciousness as the rest of our subsequent holiday unfolded. I thought back to the parents on the plane, tormented and trying to keep their babies and toddlers quiet. They were far more uptight than the generally jovial and sympathetic passengers who were no doubt secretly celebrating being past that stage of life. I looked around at other parents, shouting, smacking and trying to manage screaming, irritable, disorientated, out of sorts, frustrated and nagging children. First prize in the “what were we thinking” contest should have gone to a German couple in the Tzitzikama carrying their screaming toddler and an infant in backpacks. They had travelled across the world to be sherpas, trekking up a mountain with customers who would rather be in their cots at home having warm milk and cookies.

Young children and babies react badly to being taken out of routine. It can be stressful and disorienting for them. By the time they adjust it's time to leave and then, like a second migration, they are just as upset to get home. Children do not need a break from the stress of the working world and, in fact, find it more stressful to be out of their familiar environment.

People who have holiday homes often do more work entertaining and cooking for guests than they do at home. Holidays spent in this way can create more stress than being at home. These scenarios can often lead to marital strife. Another belief or fantasy of holiday bonding is that couples will have time to reconnect and share some closeness and romance. This becomes impossible when guests, children's friends, extended family and countless other demands can make privacy, alone time, energy and mood scarce commodities. Couple bonding time being difficult, unsatisfactory or impossible can lead to resentment and strife, albeit in luxury surroundings. When couples get home their tans are merely the external manifestation of their inner burning frustration or resentment.

“HOLIDAYS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT BEING THAT THEY HELP YOU TO RESTORE YOUR OWN SENSE OF WHOLENESS AND TO BRING AN INCREASED SENSE OF ABUNDANCE AND RESOURCEFULNESS INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIPS.”

People spend a fortune with the illusion that money will buy all of the above. When it does not, it leads to more cynicism about family and general disappointment. If you are one of those people who work hard and unrelentingly the whole year, investing all your hope for respite and recovery in your end-of-year holiday, then you are particularly vulnerable. After all, if it does not work out as planned, you have to wait an entire year for the next opportunity. And, of course, there's no guarantee the next holiday will be any better.

Holidays are really important for a variety of reasons. The most important and germane to this series is that they help you to restore your own sense of wholeness and to bring an increased sense of abundance and resourcefulness into your relationships. I regard them as being as much part of work as work itself. You can only give your best to your occupation if you are energised and in a resourceful state of being. You can only give your family the best of who you are if you feel supported, nurtured and enriched. You provide those things for yourself when you give yourself the time to rest, recuperate, and get re-inspired and refreshed. You can only give of your best if you are conscious about your goals, desires, aspirations and values. In the business and clutter of work, you often lose touch with who you are, what you need, and what is truly important to you as a person and for your sense of well-being.

In order to reconnect with these things, you need both the time and space for reflection and deepened self-awareness. You also need to be relaxed and deeply rested. For this, you need to be in a place with no reminders or association to your world of work in order to get a

proper break and truly re-establish your priorities and see the bigger picture of who you are and what you want in life. With regard to relationships, I do not believe ‘quality time’ is more important than ‘quantity time’. You need a substantial amount of time to unwind, get into a new rhythm, get past the superficial and mundane, and start truly connecting with each other. In the extended timeframes afforded you by a holiday, you have time to connect not only as a family group, but also to deepen your individual connections in ways you seldom have time for at home. Long walks on the beach with a child can lead to conversations that are rarely possible given the limitations and rigid structure of everyday life. Human beings need play in order to stay in balance. Joyfulness and mirth restore optimism, connection to your creativity, and sense of well-being. Playfulness and humour also bond people and restores or deepens your sense of connection and intimacy.

For adults, this often requires a special environment and some conscious organisation to achieve. Everything about holidays is reminiscent of freedom and spontaneity. In order to achieve a successful holiday, however, you need planning and negotiation. Each person involved in the anticipated holiday needs to make their wishes, preferences, and expectations of what they want from the holiday clear. Then you need to plan around what each person hopes for and expects, or at least manage expectations, especially, for example, around the available money to spend. I humbly suggest families use the whole year as bonding time, and like those who send their children to camp, the holidays as respite time. ■