

Vacations—Bah Humbug!

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Loose talk has been heard this week at our Blue Grass farm about taking “a vacation” somewhere, sort of soon and with “somebody”—a catchall category intended to snag me. Devils -- big and small -- lurk with menace in the details.

I like to stay home during the summer. We have pretty scenery, cool weather, a wet swimming pond and no bugs to swat or even speak of. People come *here* for vacations.

We also have work that needs to be done.

When I’ve taken summer vacations in the past, I usually end up in a place like the one I left. I don’t like beaches in the summer where I’m deep-fried in oil and sleep on sandy sheets. I hate resorts where I’m expected to dress up, sit straight and talk small.

I’m always dogged by the feeling that I should be doing farm work in the summer, not lolling on a beach like a fat walrus or hiking from pointless Point A to pointless Point B for the sake of cardio-vascular exercise.

Every day for the last two weeks I’ve watched tractors pulling balers, tedders, rakes and hay wagons as they shuttle from field to barn and back. I, too, am in that flow. Each bale in the barn is security for the winter. Who would prefer sweating on a beach to sweating on a hay wagon? (I’m not going to name names for this committee, but I could.)

Farmers rarely take summer vacations, because there’s always something to fix, feed, furrow or finish. A winter vacation is feasible unless you run a dairy herd. Then, escape is possible only if you can shackle an equal number of skilled substitutes into your stanchions.

Our family three spent two February weeks in Virgin Gorda some years ago. Twice a day, we drove to a white-sand, mile-long beach that we had to ourselves. About the second afternoon, I was fed up with desperately seeking shade under its one salt-dwarfed tree that boasted three leaves.

On the other hand, the British Virgin Islands did let me smoke Cuban cigars without being a criminal. Cuban cigars are rolled by exploited Cubans rather than the legal Cuban-seed cigars rolled by exploited Dominicans.

This was the vacation where I continued to puff away and read the newspaper while sitting on the porch of our rental house as an earthquake

rattled the island, causing a woman of my matrimonial acquaintance to shout, “Corky, do something!”

I *was* doing something and continued to do so.

I can report that Cuban cigar smoke calms crustal tremors in a matter of seconds. I’ve never received full credit for my achievement.

This was not the vacation, incidentally, when the outboard motor on my sailboat decided to jump ship and sputter in a circle like a possessed NASCAR driver on his way down the drain. I had foresightedly attached a security chain to this renegade, because I was familiar with its habits. A certain eyewitness crew member tells a version of this saga very well, complete with the sounds of a drowning Volvo motor foiled in its attempt to swim back to its birth-place fjord in Sweden.

And this was also not the New Hampshire vacation when this newly and professionally repaired sailboat sank upon being launched as I sat at the tiller. I’m sure that smoke from a banned Cuban cigar would have plugged the new and professionally installed holes in the hull.

Nor was it the vacation when I spent most of my time fixing the rental unit’s water system, or the other one when I discovered upon arrival that the lake-side house designed by a Wright disciple had a leaky flat roof and only one toilet that had not functioned for several years. I dubbed it, “Failing Waters.”

I think some guys are more cut out for vacations than others.

My opinion on vacations does not sit well with a certain unnamed party of matrimonial proximity who thinks I’m an idiot. (This is not her only argument in advancing the affirmative of this proposition.)

In the last week, I’ve heard the word “beach” rear its ugly head, along with “resort” and even “Venice.” It’s not clear to me why I would like being rowed around on a 100-degree day in fetid canals that breed malarial mosquitoes, pickpockets and guys making noises in my wife’s direction. I’m sure Venetians would mistake us for American tourists, even though I’m fluent in lasagna and two dialects of pizza.

I can manage vacations in small doses, like long weekends or short weeks. If I can couple them with “work,” I feel better and so does my adjusted gross income for tax purposes.

The problem with a family vacation is simple: the family does it together.

Families have a tendency to get on each other’s nerves, especially when everyone’s in the same room. It’s a lot more efficient to annoy each other at home than to pay for it on the road.

The structural flaw in family vacation is the family itself. Each member wants to do something different at the same time. The inability of the group to agree on what the group wants to do results in either a test of strength as to whose agenda will be imposed on the others or going separate ways.

Family vacations would be much improved if we agreed that we weren't related. Civility would reign. No one could bring up who threw what at whom at the family dining table 50 years ago.

Families, of course, are in complete denial about how vacationing together ends up rubbing everyone the wrong way.

We think if we move the whole mess to Yellowstone in a station wagon that the interests of an eight-year-old girl will magically mesh with that of her 16-year-old brother, and that their consensus will be compatible with the different agendas of each parent who are arguing over who is responsible for the extortionist bear licking their windshield as he holds out both paws for a meal. Yellowstone bears have grown fat on ransoms paid by those trapped in licked vehicles.

A powerful argument should be made for the non-family, family vacation. Each member should go wherever, including nowhere, which is my preferred destination.

The other possibility is to go on vacation with a non-family member...and see how that works. I'm looking for someone who likes to fix sailboats, detests sand, doesn't mind a little shake-rattle-and-roll underfoot and feels guilty when not suffering heat stroke on a hay wagon. Applicants have not overwhelmed by inbox.

In any event, I've agreed to a five-day weekend over July 4th to visit family and friends in Pittsburgh. If things get too rough, I will launch my sailboat at The Point where the Monongahela meets the Allegheny to form the Ohio and relive the glorious sinkings of past vacations.

Were I able to smoke a Cuban cigar, I'm pretty sure I could sail into the sunset despite the leaks.

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