

## The hedonist's guide to summer

Find it hard to unwind? Michael Flocker - who's written the book on it - shows you how to put the pleasure back into leisure



Holidays are all about slowing down, says Michael Flocker. Photograph: Corbis

At last! You've worked all year long for this and you're finally heading off on that much-needed holiday of which you've been dreaming.

Fantastic. Of course, you'll need to be fully prepared, and packing wisely is the first step. So make a checklist: Smart phone, laptop, iPad, printed itineraries, workout clothes, ear buds and fat-burning pills. Got them all together? Good. Now stuff them all in a bag and chuck them in the back of the closet.

If you're to gain anything whatsoever from this vacation, you're going to have to break a few bad habits before you set off. Unfortunately, these days, it

seems as though leisure and pleasure have joined the ranks of the lost arts. Many of us have become so accustomed to racing along like hamsters in a wheel, that we have forgotten how to slow down. People stare at computer screens all day, eat lunch at their desks, plan their daily schedules on hand-held devices, yammer away on their mobiles about nothing at all and make "play dates" for their children. Obsessed with becoming richer, thinner, more successful and, implausibly, even younger, millions of us deprive ourselves on a daily basis of the one thing we misguidedly believe we are rushing towards - the good life.

But what exactly is the good life? Is it not a blissfully unstructured day, free of interruption and anxiety, an afternoon nap, and an evening of good food and wine followed by a long evening of conversation, laughter and whatever else may pop up?

Well, it certainly should be. And that is why, when the holidays finally arrive, you must say no to technology, -excessive planning and ambitious itineraries. The perfect vacation is one during which you decompress, slow down and return to that long-lost state of childhood bliss. In short, it's all about hedonism.

To some, the notion of hedonism conjures up visions of excessive, reckless and selfish debauchery, but this is a misguided interpretation of a truly beautiful concept. The true philosophy of hedonism is based on the premise that pleasure is the highest good, and that everything we do should be in the pursuit of pleasure. That said, the philosophy also warns that we must also avoid those pleasures which may lead to pain. A few glasses of wine with dinner is pleasurable, but a few bottles will surely lead to some serious pain the next morning. You see? It's very simple.

Of course, our individual pleasures are as unique to us as the features on our faces. Your idea of pleasure may be a leisurely stroll through a world-class museum. Someone else's might be reading a trashy novel poolside. Another might choose to simply lie in a hammock beneath the stars. Each of these is an entirely worthy pursuit. The key to a truly satisfying vacation is to allow it to unfold naturally and not to race about trying to pack everything you ever imagined into a limited time span. Don't try and see four cities in seven days. All your memories will be of trains or airplanes. Pick one place, or two if time allows, that you really want to visit and allow yourself to slow down and take it all in.

**Ditch the technology**

First and foremost, turn off your phone and keep it off. Emergencies have a way of working themselves out if you just let them. You do not need to run around looking for a wifi connection to open every email and check-in with work. If you believe that it will all fall apart in your absence, you are mistaken. No one is indispensable. Also, you do not need to film everything you see - do you really want to be that idiot bumping into others because you're filming the back of your partner's head for posterity? You want to enjoy your vacation, not document every step of it in order to torture the relatives when you get back home.

### **Indulge yourself**

You do not need to work out, jog or count calories on vacation. No one ever became obese in the course of a week, so let it go. You should focus on rejuvenating both your soul and body by eating well, sleeping in, enjoying the sun and reclining frequently. Don't deny yourself the cream sauces, the pastas and the desserts. You'll work them off by swimming, strolling or sightseeing. If you really want to improve your health, there are plenty of proven benefits to be found in red wine, abundant laughter and good sex. Let that be your new workout regimen.

### **Get lost**

When it comes to sightseeing, try not to get carried away. You do not need to see everything, and you don't want to spend your entire holiday standing in endless queues of obnoxious tourists waddling along like baby ducks. That's just sad. Forge your own path and find your own little corners of the city. The simple act of wandering aimlessly can yield the most wonderful surprises. Wouldn't you rather stumble upon a charming little restaurant that is your own romantic discovery, or a little antique shop where you can buy something unique? Allow yourself to get lost and see what happens.

### **Ignore the clock**

Given the pace of life these days, it is very tempting while on vacation to keep checking the clock. The anxiety over making the most of one's time can lead to a neurotic need to keep moving, but ironically, that only makes the time pass more quickly. If you truly want to make the most of your holiday, you need to slow down. An afternoon nap is not time wasted. Sitting in the piazza or a sidewalk cafe in silence can be just as rewarding as a trip to the museum. Your time will be much better spent slowing your heart rate and calming your mind than it will racing about waving maps in the air.

## **Savour the sensual**

It is also worth pointing out that holidays are a time for sensuality. It may very well be of a romantic nature, but it might also be as simple as bobbing in the ocean, sunbathing in the nude, splurging on a massage at the hotel or drifting away to the sounds of a band while sipping cocktails under a palm tree. Avoid the temptation to judge, overthink and evaluate every experience you have. If it's good, stay there. If it's not, move on.

## **Cut loose**

That said, no holiday is truly complete without a hint of the scandalous. At some point, take advantage of your anonymity and let go of your inhibitions. You didn't fly all this way to be a wallflower, did you?

## **Make the most of it**

At the end of the day, your vacation is not about the postcards you send home, the number of landmarks you photograph, or the souvenirs you buy for those at home. It is about you and your quality of life. Your job may be a drag, your luck may be in a slump and your finances may be questionable, but this is your time, and it is your obligation to yourself to make the most of it. Hedonism is not selfish, it is not reckless and it is not wrong. In the world we now live in, it is the key to sanity. Enjoy!

• *Michael Flocker's The Hedonism Handbook: Mastering The Lost Arts Of Leisure And Pleasure is published by Da Capo Press at £7.99.*