



FAMILY HOLIDAYS



FOREVER

STORY BY ROB GREENAWAY

Rob Greenaway suggests that if you have children, now is the time to take them on holiday. They'll never forget it and perhaps never enjoy a holiday in quite the same way.





NOSTALGIA AND I GO BACK A LONG WAY. WHILE I HAVE NO PROBLEM WITH THE PRESENT, I LOVE THE PAST. THAT'S BECAUSE I HAD THE WORLD'S BEST FAMILY HOLIDAYS WHEN I WAS YOUNG. THOSE DAYS CAN NEVER BE RE-CREATED, BECAUSE A CHILD'S EXPERIENCE OF A GOOD FAMILY HOLIDAY IS UNIQUE.

As a child you don't care how much the holiday costs, and time is an immeasurable concept. Every day is a new start. You're with the most important people in your life – your family. The pressure of existence is reduced to a circle of familiar people and the ground on which you stand. The future is a different planet. You can focus fully on the task at hand: having a good time.

Most importantly, there is a weird lack of context. As a child, you're the centre of the universe and every experience is intense and deeply remembered. One rock pool can keep you happily entertained for hours.

It's warm – unless you've gone skiing. The weather smiles. Evenings are balmy and days last for years.

I was lucky. Dad was a self-employed furniture manufacturer who built boats almost out of habit. Mum taught at a secondary school. That meant my two sisters and I had six weeks at sea every Christmas. We forgot what day it was and slept itchy with salt and sun-burn. We hunted stingrays and strolled over the dry grass of Mercury Island to explore secret caves. My bunk had an opening porthole and I could lie in bed and watch the sun rise over pohutukawa and sand, and I closed my eyes enveloped by the smell of the sea.

The call of a kingfisher takes me right back. I thought everyone had holidays like that. Back at school we asked each other, 'What did you do for Christmas?'

Many of my friends would reply, 'I stayed around home. We went to the beach a couple of times. And Mum took us shopping.'

I learnt to shut up. Few kids were interested.

In the 1980s I worked over summer for the Department of Lands and Survey in Hawke's Bay, and frequented the Clifton Motor Camp at the base of Cape Kidnappers. Rows of caravans lined the sea with no more than a metre

between awning and neighbour. Most of the

campers had been coming to the same spot for decades. An alarming number had arrived as children, met their future husbands and wives in the camp, married and now brought their own children to Clifton.

What stunned me was that half the campers were no more than 20 kilometres from home. Their neighbours in the campsite were their neighbours for the rest of the year – literally. The camp was a scaled-down replica of nearby suburbia.

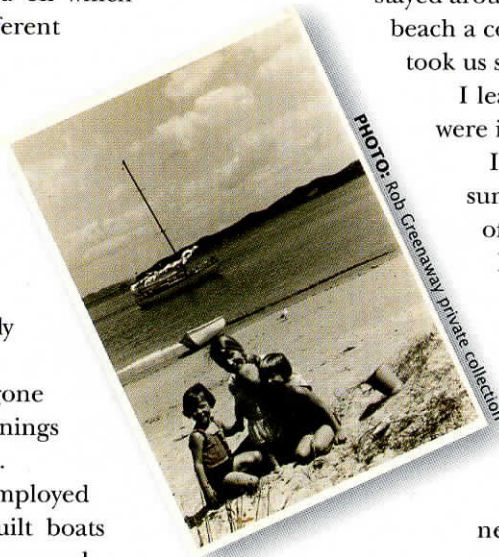


PHOTO: Rob Greenway private collection



They nipped back to their houses to mow the lawns and raid the freezer.

I had to ask, 'Why on earth are you doing this? Surely you want to get away from each other?'

'Oh no,' one replied. 'We ignore each other all year. Too busy with work and kids' sport. This way we get to spend a decent time together, talking and fishing.'

There was little evidence of any fishing.

'It's a brilliant holiday. All our kids know each other and play together. We can forget about them.'

As the season progressed, dad would go back to work and the family would stay for the remainder of the school break. He'd turn up in the afternoon, whip off his suit and tie, or overalls, and settle into a deckchair to enjoy the last rays of the setting sun. It was a picture of bliss.

Six weeks in a caravan, sharing a camping ground with your entire neighbourhood isn't my first choice. But remember – different strokes for different folks.

To quantify this variety of strokes, I randomly selected a dozen '30-something' individuals from my address list and emailed them two questions: 'What was your best family holiday as a child?' And, 'What did you do over most summer breaks?'

The results suggest New Zealand is a beach, and that childhood holidays are with us forever. But the picture is not all Fanta and skittles. First, what not to do with your children:

William: Any trip away on a 'big' holiday typically involved Dad driving too quickly and me

getting carsick.

Kate: I can tell you what our best holiday wasn't. The time Mum and Dad decided to tour the South Island – in contrast to our traditional 'go to one rented house and stay there' approach. Dad was forever telling my brother and I to look out the window at the scenery. We were far more interested in 'getting there' or playing with our hand puppets in the back seat.

The common theme? Too much driving. That's why I enjoy sailing – the journey is the activity and there aren't any traffic lights or queues.

Only a few respondents regularly stayed home over summer, and frequently there was a rural reason. Summer on the farm means harvesting. August features lambing.

Marie: I spent most summer holidays reading books about others having adventurous holidays and feeling very sorry for myself.

Kevin: We were based at home and roamed far and wide in the surrounding rural areas – eeling, swimming in the river and helping out on a neighbour's farm. Just doing things and not spending much time inside.

William: Since we lived in the country most summers were spent on the ten-acre block. Holidays away were a bit of a luxury. Up to the age of 12 I just did boys' stuff around the countryside. After that I spent summers working at local market gardens or on my uncle's farm, and later on the West Coast on a Lands and Survey development farm up the Grey Valley.

And the most memorable holidays?

George: Two family holidays stand out in my memory. One was spent in Tasman, two-thirds of the way to Motueka from Nelson. It was in a fruit pickers' house that my folks had rented over Christmas for about seven days. Time was spent playing in the estuary, fishing with peas from the Motueka wharf, carting Dad's golf clubs and doing a bit of bird watching.

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James: I think going to D'Urville Island would have been one of the top few greats. We stayed at the old school at Catherine Cove with teacher friends of my Dad's. Fishing was the most frequent activity.

Kate: We rented a house in different places around the South Island each year and stayed for

two or three weeks. I remember Temuka, Nelson, Blenheim and Ashburton. The main criterion was ready access to water. We kids swam every day – whether it was the beach, a lake or river. I recall French cricket played a large part, and we were outdoors a lot. Evenings were spent playing cards (especially if my grandmother was with us) or board games. A favourite was Cleudo. In fact my husband and I have just acquired a new set of Cleudo so I can relive my past holiday experiences!

Jonathan: A trip to the Bay of Islands to camp on an island with some family friends in a big old canvas tent. Catching a kingfish, marinating it and eating it raw. Getting moved on for camping on the wrong island. Dad letting me steer the speed boat. Or at a beach on the east coast, either near Whangarei or on the east side of the Coromandel Peninsula down as far as Whangamata. Soaking in the sun 'til my tender young skin peeled (again). Swimming in the surf. Getting pounded by the biggest waves. Ducking under the REALLY scary ones.

Graham: We use to go to Morrison's Bush in the Wairarapa – just a patch of sandy riverbank where the same families camped every summer. The first job on arrival was digging a long-drop in a different place from the previous year. We spent the days floating around in eddies in the Ruamahanga River on tractor tyres, and lying in the sun. A really exciting day out was a trip to the ice-cream shop in Greytown.

My feeling is that those low cost family holidays, like Graham's, are highly memorable. My family's first riverside camping trips relied on a trailer for accommodation, with a tarpaulin stretched over a jury-rigged ridgepole. The biggest input isn't money. It's time – dedicated time with the family. The second is location – a riverbank, a beach, a lake or a big paddock. You can find a pile of these in New Zealand's numerous regional parks and other conservation areas. Auckland offers a great collection – almost 35,000 hectares including Wenderholm, Shakespeare, Long Bay, the Waitakere Ranges and Tawharanui.

Going by the Auckland Regional Council's visitor statistics, their parks are hugely popular, with more than seven million visits annually and sufficient campsites to cater for over 2000 people per night. Service is basic, with block toilets and no hot water, but the beaches are beautiful. Over summer, overnight camping fees are between \$5 and \$8 per adult per night, \$2 and \$3 for children and pre-schoolers are free. You'll need to book well ahead since they are extremely popular. In

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several of these parks it is also possible to book a sizeable picnic site for the day, just like at The Groynes in Christchurch. Almost every district in New Zealand has a similar range of camping and picnic opportunities. Wellington has several gems in Battle Hill, Kaitoke and Belmont, and Queen Elizabeth Regional Park on the west coast, which you can get to by commuter train.

Fifty years ago, taking a tram to Sumner from Christchurch or to Plimmerton from Wellington was a standard weekend exercise. Families would pile into the carriages with prams and picnic baskets. The cost was minimal and, by all accounts, fun was had by all. No cars meant no parking problems, relative silence and, perhaps best of all, no carparks blotting the foreshore. There's no reason why that affordable simplicity can't be regained. If you've a tight budget – and petrol prices continue to rise – look at the public transport options, grab the kids, a rug, a simple picnic, and go for it.

For information phone the regional councils in Auckland or Wellington (they are the only regional councils who offer parks), or your local authority. Most have excellent web-sites.

Of course there are the thousands of private camping grounds, which are undergoing something of a revival.

According to the Marketing Manager of 'Top 10 Holiday Parks', Rachel Alexander, campgrounds are responding to a boom in demand and the requirements of the modern family. The chain of 46 holiday parks she represents hosts 1.6 million 'person nights' a year – up 25 per cent on the past 12 months.

Such sites as the Top 10 Holiday Park at Franz Josef have set new trends by building unisex bathroom modules, with a modern toilet, shower and basin facilities in one cubicle. May the trend continue! A campsite will cost between \$16 and \$28, while a cabin will range from \$28 to \$40.

One of my earliest experiences of camping was a caravan in Waihau Bay on the East Cape during end-of-term holidays. It seemed perfectly normal to set up home on the side of the road beneath the pohutukawa trees. The stony beaches were full of rock pools – home to octopus, crabs and transparent shrimps. A drover's flock of sheep occasionally trapped the caravan. Apparently there was a proper camping ground nearby. We never bothered to locate it. 'No camping' signs eventually appeared but no one seemed to know to whom they applied.

How things have changed. The growth in the popularity of campervans has meant the 'no camping' signs are more serious. The issue is sewage. Formal campgrounds are best as they have purpose-designed sumps to take the contents of chemical toilets. Picnic sites do not.

Campervan companies provide maps highlighting the locations of dumping stations. It is important to follow the instructions to empty effluent at these dumping stations to keep New Zealand beautiful.

Then there's the essential Kiwi bach or crib. Once a cheap old shed with creaky, leaky floors and ceiling, they are fast becoming pricey second-homes, and out of reach of many incomes. Instead of purchasing a bach or crib, consider rentals and home swaps. That way you get to stay in a new spot each year, and don't spend your entire

break worrying about overflowing septic tanks and the state of the paint work, and the rest of the year worried about security. Several excellent dedicated directories are published annually, listing locations and costs (generally between \$50 and \$100 per night for a rental). They're good value. If you're not keen on strangers, what about swapping houses with a relative?

I believe one of the most cost-effective forms of accommodation in New Zealand is the Department of Conservation's tramping huts. For a few dollars a night you get internationally acclaimed scenery, a bed, toilets, no television, fascinating company and often cooking facilities. You'll even meet the occasional New Zealander! For a good quality hut you'll pay around \$10 per night. Basic huts are about \$5. Shelters, without toilets and water, are free. The very flash huts – with wood or coal burners, gas stoves, flush toilets and hut wardens – are a little more pricey at above the \$20 mark.

However, there's only one necessary ingredient in a family break. And that's the family. With one of those, there's nothing to stop you taking the kids on the holiday of their life. Because, if you spend time with them, it will be.

Special thanks to Mrs Wigzell for saving these nostalgic 1930s magazines and allowing New Zealand Outside the use of the photos for this article.
