



## 72-hour party people

Who has the time and freedom to take a two-week vacation any more? For a growing cadre of travellers, the action-packed mini-trip to a far-flung destination is the way to go

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Somewhere between the throbbing techno and Spanish hip hop, vodkas mixed with Guru energy drink to keep the jet-lagged travellers awake, streams of tiny soap bubbles wafting from the ceiling and blasts of cooling mist, Geneviève L'Abbé's whirlwind getaway finally hit its zenith. "It was completely magic," she says. "Everything was so different."

L'Abbé, an equities trader from Montreal, and her friend François had left for Madrid on a Friday afternoon. Arriving at 9:30 Saturday morning for a day of tapas, sangria and some leisurely sightseeing, by 2 a.m. Sunday they were dancing the night away at the trendy Teatro Kapital nightclub. Later, they strolled through the Rastro flea market and snoozed under the sun at famed Parque del Buen Retiro, the city's central park. On Monday afternoon, they headed home. Their visit to the Spanish capital had lasted just over 73 hours, cost around \$2,000 and was booked only the Wednesday before departure.

While the idea of flying across the Atlantic for a weekend might seem daunting and decadent to some, mini-trips have become L'Abbé's preferred mode of relaxation, a way to *changer la mal de place* - take a break from the ordinary. "You just want to go somewhere where it's sunny, get out of the city for a while," the 33-year-old says.

It's an increasingly common way of thinking. Studies show that people are taking shorter, more frequent vacations, and they're travelling on impulse more often than ever before. Getaways of no more than four days account for 56 per cent of all trips by Americans, an increase of 10 per cent in the past five years, according to a recent survey by Nova Scotia's Tourism Ministry. A recent British study similarly indicated that tourists are taking fewer traditional, two-week vacations and more mini-trips throughout the year, with 61 per cent claiming to prefer short getaways. And Canadian figures due this year will probably show similar travel patterns, according to the Travel Industry Association of Canada.

Mini-trippers typically have plenty of discretionary income, but they suffer from what some in the travel industry call "time poverty," with personal and work obligations preventing them from taking long vacations.

They are generally seasoned travellers who are not content merely to check into a spa or boutique hotel a short drive from home. Instead, they are flying farther, spending lavishly - at least 15 per cent more on mini-trips than on longer vacations, according to the research - and packing more activity into some surprisingly inventive getaways. This, despite the overall inconvenience of air travel and the physical toll of long-haul flights.

"These aren't the kind of vacations where you just sit down and do nothing," says Eirini Demetelin, co-owner of Superior Travel/Open Skies, a Montreal agency specializing in luxury cruises and travel. "They're action-packed and non-stop. It's all about creating that 'wow' moment."

One popular getaway for Demetelin's moneyed clientele is a new, four-day package from Toronto to Dubai. And her clients are flying across North America and beyond to see live performances and art exhibitions; for example, she booked several weekend trips to Washington, D.C., to see the J.M.W. Turner exhibition, which moves to Dallas next month and New York in June.

For golf, they're seeking out unique courses and resorts, such as the Blue Monster at Miami's Doral Golf Resort and Spa or the Sanctuary Hotel on Kiawah Island, near Charleston, S.C.

And, of course, there's Las Vegas. The prototypical mini-trip destination now attracts Cirque du Soleil fans as often as gamblers and partygoers, but it is also becoming a jumping-off point for mini-trips to exclusive retreats such as the Red Mountain Spa in St. George, Utah.

Demetelin says the trend is being driven by the proliferation of direct flights and the veritable feast of getaway packages offered by travel agencies, hotels and tour operators.

"I could sit on the phone for 20 minutes and we could go around the world thinking of fun and unique mini-breaks," she says. "There's absolutely no limit to the imagination." on the return portion of flights. Going to Europe used to require a seven-night stay in order to qualify for a lower fare; now, a long weekend with a Saturday-night stopover gets the same rate. Some airlines even sell one-way mix-and-match discount fares to Europe, making it easier to fly there with Air Transat, say, and back with Zoom Airlines.

## A quick getaway with the kids

But not everyone wants to fly, let alone fly first-class. Car trips still make up the majority of shorter getaways and are often the favourite mode of transportation for people travelling with children. So parents are going to new lengths to make mini-vacations memorable.

Annie Caldwell, a Toronto mother of two, recently drove her 10-year-old daughter, Emma, to New York for the first time on an unusual shopping expedition. After a stop near Albany, N.Y., to collect Caldwell's friend Donna and her daughter Zoe, 11, they continued on to Manhattan, arriving on a Saturday afternoon for a long-anticipated visit to American Girl Place, the trendy doll emporium.

Later, they scored tough-to-come-by dinner reservations at the store's girl-themed café. During a "cheap and cheerful" meal, Emma's purchase, "2007 Girl of the Year" Nicki, was given her own doll-sized booster seat at the table with her ecstatic new owner.

By the time the mothers and daughters left for home early Sunday evening, they had seen Times Square, taken in the view from Rockefeller Center's 70th-floor observation deck, Top of the Rock, shopped at Bloomingdales and nearby Dylan's Candy Bar, and strolled Central Park's southern tip. With every activity chosen for its special meaning for her daughter, it was Caldwell's best trip ever to New York.

"I don't know who was happier - Emma or me," she said. "I've never seen my daughter beam from ear to ear. She was just so excited the whole time."

Now, taking children on vacation doesn't necessarily encourage relaxation; in the British study, nearly 40 per cent of parents said they ended up exhausted by their family mini-trips. But trying something a little more adventurous than a resort with a kids club doesn't have to be stressful.

On a recent work-related mini-trip to Boston, a client asked Toronto travel agent Ruby Silvertown to book his children on the trip - and into etiquette school.

Another requested a short, positively dizzying adventure in Belize for his young brood, including visits to Mayan temple ruins, cave tubing, zip lining in the rain forest and snorkelling among sharks and stingrays.

And when a Bay Street broker found his father-daughter trip to New York interrupted by an unscheduled business meeting, he asked Silvertown to step in. Through "an incredibly connected friend" in the Big Apple, she arranged for his two daughters to go behind the scenes of the New York City Ballet for the afternoon.

"People used to want to go away and veg for a weekend. Nowadays, they don't want that, and they don't want their kids just to have glorified babysitting, either," says Silvertown, who is president of luxury travel agency the Travel Network. "They're calling a couple of days before, they want these unbelievable trips, and we all jump to give them something unique."

*Pack your bags for a long weekend*

**A SELECTION OF DOABLE GETAWAYS FOR THE TIME-STRAPPED TRAVELLER:**

trip no. 1 Dubai for a four-day getaway.

The transportation Non-stop flight from Toronto with Emirates (<http://www.emirates.com>).

The hotel Emirates Al Maha Desert Resort & Spa (<http://www.al-maha.com>; 971-4-303-4222), an oasis within a 225-square-kilometre desert conservation reserve, with views of the Hajar Mountains and only 45 minutes from the bustle of Dubai city.

The food The Dune Dinner, a feast in a "Bedouin encampment," serves traditional Middle Eastern dishes cooked over an open fire, sweet mint tea and a relaxing shisha pipe afterward, all to traditional music.

The fun Try the spa's signature Desert Sand-Herb Rasoul Scrub, a 60-minute "ancient healing ritual" consisting of a full-body scrub on a heated massage table, showers, aromatic steam, lotions and a mud bath that "you and your partner can apply [to] each other."

Trip No. 2 Prague for a long weekend.

The transportation Direct flights from Montreal and Toronto with Czech Airlines ([www.czechairlines.com](http://www.czechairlines.com)).

The hotel Four Seasons Prague (Velešlavínova 2a/1098; <http://www.fourseasons.com/Prague>; 420-221-427-000). Gracing the banks of the Vltava River, the hotel boasts some of the largest rooms in the city.

The food C'est La Vie (Rični 1, Prague 1, Kampa, Malá Strana; <http://www.cestlavie.cz>; 420-721-158-403). The restaurant has an extensive wine cellar and an inventive fish and seafood menu. But the real draw is the relaxing terrace on the Vltava with a view of the historic Charles Bridge, connecting Old Town to Prague Castle.

The fun A walking tour of 12th-century Old Town with one of the many tour operators, including British-based Prague Experience (<http://www.pragueexperience.com>; 0044-1689-898-500).

Trip No. 3 Amsterdam for the weekend.

The transportation Direct flight from Montreal or Toronto with KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (<http://www.klm.com>).

The hotel Hotel Pulitzer (Prinsengracht 315-331; <http://www.starwoodhotels.com>). A collection of 25 restored 17th- and 18th-century canal houses overlooking the Prinsengracht and Keizersgracht canals in Amsterdam's old city.

The food Restaurant Vermeer (Prins Hendrikkade 59-72; <http://www.restaurantvermeer.nl>; 312-055-648-85). Situated in the NH Barbizon Palace hotel, Vermeer has a one-starred Michelin menu - and a private slip for local canal-dwelling customers.

The fun Rent the hotel's canal boat for a picturesque journey; shop the "Nine Streets" for one-of-a-kind leisurewear; make a solemn visit to the Anne Frank House, some 100 metres from your hotel.