

Is traveling really romantic?

By Justin Nebel

I raced home from work on empty roads under a waxing moon with open windows, a cold wind blasting my face and worries about my dissolving relationship on my mind. It was 3 a.m. and I had promised Rachel I would be back by midnight to help pack for a road trip we were starting the following day. Perhaps, we were told, a romantic getaway down the California coast would make up for weeks of late nights and a soul-sapping loss of intimacy.

During the bride-by-capture era, which lasted through the Middle Ages, grooms would kidnap their wives-to-be the month before marriage and try to impregnate them before relatives could come to the rescue. By the 19th century, wealthy couples were more likely to go on month-long wedding extravaganzas, a trend referred to as honeymooning. Lovers, accompanied by family and friends, trekked across the country to watering holes such as Berkeley Hot Springs, Saratoga Springs, the Jersey Shore and Cape Cod. The fashionable tour was a roster of such must-see Americana locales, and by 1900, Niagara Falls topped the list. But by the 1950s no aristocrat in his right mind would be seen there—the popularization of the automobile made getaways available to the masses.

In Walt Whitman's times vacations were unheard of, explains Dr. Lllen Furlough, a historian at the University of Kentucky. Taking time off work was an idea that came about in Europe in the 1930s in the form of state-sponsored vacations. Nationalistic governments recommended vacations to build support for the regime. In the U.S. the engine pushing vacations wasn't the government, but advertisers, whose industry exploded in the flush times after World War II.

"For the traveling middle-class honeymoon had become an established fact," explains Karen Dubinsky, in *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymoon and Tourism at Niagara Falls*. According to Dubinsky, the purpose of the honeymoon in America fifty years ago was for newly-wed couples to go away in order to have sex in private. A sexually unsuccessful honeymoon could lead to lifelong impotency for males. Women were known to suffer from honeymoon shock, which led to nervous breakdowns and mental disorders. "Postwar sex experts imagined a direct line that began at the honeymoon and extended to the health and well-being of the marriage and, hence society itself," writes Dubinsky. "A good send-off, in the form of a proper honeymoon, was crucial."

Today, few couples wait for such a "send-off" before having sex but a good trip can still spark magic. Rachel and I met in New York City the day after Valentine's Day, but it wasn't until a road trip to an uninhabited Georgia island that we consummated our love. We slept on a balmy beach under a stroke of stars and in the orange sunrise our young love seemed to glow eternal. Three months later I was offered an internship at a newspaper in California and we were on the road again, taking the long way across the country, through rural Quebec and the North Woods. We made love in the Black Hills and the Big Horns and in the Oregon desert saw the sky scream red from a windswept ridge. But in California my newspaper job became my newspaper life, and I rarely saw Rachel.

When I reached home the night before our getaway, I expected her to be waiting up, but she wasn't. I dumped my bags in the hallway, cracked the fridge and picked through a platter of day-old nachos. "I only get you when you're tired and hungry," Rachel said after I finally slipped into bed. "Your work has taken over everything." She wore a loose blue shirt with pink swirls and in the dim light I could barely make out the curve of her collarbone. I wanted to lick her neck, taste the inside of her mouth, but,

completely exhausted, I fell asleep.

If the romantic getaway is a form of therapy then the road trip is the ultimate panacea. Driving is an escape, a chance to leave the humdrum past in a swirl of smoke and seek new experiences. There is something beckoning about an endless glaze of asphalt, the novel stitching of scenery that zips by the window in a montage of straightaways and curves. But it wasn't until the advent of the automobile that most Americans could truly explore this sensation. "The wealthy could make the fashionable tour in 1825 and the well-to-do built up the summer resorts of the 1890s," says Foster Rhea Dulles in a history about leisure travel in America, "but every Tom, Dick and Harry toured the country in the 1930s—thanks to the automobile."

Travel has changed since that time, but the road trip is still the free-spirited getaway of choice. Airplanes are stuffy and nerve-racking, a bus is hardly romantic, a boat is too much work and a train doesn't give much chance to explore off the beaten path. But cars are carefree, come and go as you please, you choose the route. With our coffees in the cup holders, bags in the back, cigs on the road and fingers on the map we getaway. But, where to?

Dennis Portnoy, a therapist in San Francisco who has counseled couples for more than 25 years, recommends Highway One road trips to buck up ailing relationships. "It is essential that couples get away from the distractions that keep them from being intimate in their everyday lives such as work, children, friends and phone calls," says Portnoy. "Newness stimulates desire," he adds. "These little breaks away from the routine put the juice back in."

Romance has long been associated with escapes into nature, says Robert Gurval, an expert in Roman culture at the University of California, Los Angeles. Often, this meant a passionate, carnal, infelicitous breed of romance. Marriage was banal for the ancient Romans, according to Gurval, part of one's duty. True love only occurred with a lover, and it didn't occur in the city or village or even within the confines of society, but rather in an Eden-like garden setting called a *locus amoenus*, a place found in poetry but seldom in reality. Classical love poets described this lovely place as a pastoral setting with trees and streams where lovers flee to entertain lascivious affairs. "The very nature of love poetry is about the *locus amoenus*," says Gurval, "this momentary dream-like ideal that just doesn't last."

Ovid, the Roman poet known for his steamy lyrics of lust and deceit, often brought his lovers to a *locus amoenus*. Book IV of Ovid's epic, *The Metamorphoses*, tells of lovers Pyramus and Thisbe who are escaping fathers that oppose their love: "At last their parents they resolve to cheat...To steal by night from home, and thence unknown / To seek the fields, and quit the unfaithful town." The lovers meet at a tomb beside a gurgling brook. After a moment of confusion brought on by a lion's roar, both commit suicide.

Shakespeare adapted the story into Romeo and Juliet. He also borrowed the idea of a *locus amoenus*. Shakespeare's lovers often fled the city and its imposing social structure for places where sexual fantasies could be acted on freely. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a love of fairies are involved in a complicated love triangle in an enchanted forest: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows," says Oberon, king of the fairies, "Where oxlips and the nodding vine grows...There sleeps Titania sometime of the night / Lull'd in these flowers with dance and delight."

As Rachel and I followed the coast past Carmel, my Titania began to giggle for no apparent reason. Her nose scrunched and



Photo by April



Photo by Phillip Lee Harvey

her cheeks crinkled. Her upper lip plumped and curled, revealing a triangle of pink gum tucked between two white teeth, a smile! She reached across the seat and brushed the hair off my brow.

At the Big Sur general store Rachel and I bought a bottle of cabernet and pulled off the highway at an overlook. Green and gold hillsides dropped into a Pacific purpled by the fading light. A patch of kelp bobbed in swells beyond the breakers. We spotted sea lions draped across foam-spattered rocks and kissed. Rachel's lips were light and firm and her tongue was soft. The inside of her mouth was like a clementine.

That night we camped on a bluff above a moonlit ocean, but, completely exhausted, we both fell asleep immediately. The following night we stayed in an artsy B&B with red walls, a brass bed set behind curtains and a splashy painting hung above a stainless steel tub depicting Adam and Eve holding vegetables over each other's sex organs. We lit candles and drew a shadow, then proceeded to our draped love nest and watched shadows of ourselves play out in the flickering light.

On getaways, couples seek seclusion and escape from the routine but perhaps most significantly, according to Dr. Ted McIlvenna, president of the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality (IASHS) in San Francisco, they're after sex. Preoccupation and fatigue are the two most important factors contributing to the lack of intimacy in a relationship, he says. On romantic getaways couples are five times more likely to have sex than when at home, according to an IASHS study of 100 couples. "It's already decided," says McIlvenna, "you've already caught the fish; you don't have to worry if you're going to have dinner."

Some sex researchers believe there is more to sex than just creating a cozy spot. When people are stimulated over and over again in the same way it loses its effectiveness, says Erick Janssen, who studies sexuality and desire at the Kinsey Institute. One way to reduce habituation is through use of imagination, he says. That could mean buying fancy lingerie, burning candles and playing melodic music, trying a new position or going on a romantic getaway. The mere effort of planning a getaway, and knowing you will be away with a lover, acts to turn lovers on. "There is something arousing in both of you engaging in the trip and wanting to make it work," Janssen says.

The ultimate question is how to make the thrill of the getaway last forever. As soon as you go back to your normal surroundings the honeymoon is over, McIlvenna says. The institute's research shows that when couples return to their routines, sex returns to pre-getaway levels. Maybe Janssen is correct; to keep the blood boiling couples must constantly be changing the stimulus. Perhaps the only way to sustain intimacy is to be continuously getting away.

These thoughts were on my mind the morning after the sleigh bed as Rachel and I sat alone at the pinewood table in the B&B while a kinesiology student diced tomatoes and onions for our breakfast. The next day we were both due back at work. But that night, rather than head home, with a blood red moon rising above the inky Pacific and an ethereal fog creeping over the hillsides, we fled further south, seeking fresh and novel vistas, and a chance, perhaps, to really get away.

Our escape didn't last. Back at the office I was now even busier. In addition to my newspaper work, I had to start writing the romantic getaway piece. There was even less time for Rachel. More road trips were out of the question, I couldn't even keep a dinner date. We planned a Thai meal in the city but I was late getting off work; by the time we got to the restaurant it had closed. I ran ahead searching frantically for someplace open. We fought over whether or not to enter a taphouse bar. She began crying. I punched a pole.

Two months after our trip down the California coast Rachel and I broke up and she returned to New York. I left my job some time later and drove back across the country alone. In Texas I camped on a windswept ridge above the Rio Grande, and the sky screamed red. This time there was no one to make love to. Instead, I did what I had done all along; I picked up a pen and wrote.