

When dream trips go bad

People invest a great deal - emotionally and financially - in that once-in-a-lifetime vacation. But as Kira Vermont writes, life has a way of hijacking you even far from home

KIRA VERMOND

FROM WEDNESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

JULY 16, 2008 AT 11:14 AM EDT

I'm lying in bed at 4 a.m., covered in sweat, nauseated, achy, chilled and clutching my head as the last remnants of a flu work their way through my body. I'm also worried sick about my mother. Right now, she's sleeping fitfully in a narrow hospital bed in Newmarket, Ont., hooked up to an IV, her best friends, my sisters, my father and my brother taking turns in the cot beside her each night.

My mother has cancer. She is dying. And I am at Club Med Ixtapa in Mexico, too far away to do anything except rack up a small fortune in long-distance calls home.

"Any change?" I ask my sister.

"No. She's still really weak, Kira. You seem so sad. Why don't you just come home?"



[Enlarge Image](#)



This is not how I expected this trip, a dream vacation I've been looking forward to for more than 20 years, would be. Yes, I've always dreamed of going to a Club Med resort. My covetousness started one year when my wealthier teen friends and their families jetted off to snorkel, sail, swim and swill for March break. I spent hours poring over Club Med travel brochures, bemoaning the fact that I was too young and didn't have the money to get there on my own steam.

Since then, I've club hopped in London, nearly run over a wayward goat with my car in St. Kitts, shown the first signs of hypothermia hiking the Chilkoot Pass in Alaska and eaten far too much barbecue with the locals in North Carolina. Still, I've never been able to kick my all-inclusive Club Med obsession.

Of course, I'm no longer a carefree teen or twentysomething who can afford to spend long hours by the pool drinking margaritas. Instead, I have little kids in tow. So I wondered if this dream vacation would live up to the fantasy. Probably not, but I was banking on having some nifty epiphany along the way.

'A HEIGHTENED EXPERIENCE'

Dream vacations aren't like other trips. They're the ones we have written down on a to-do-before-you-die list or burned so deeply into our souls that they're part of our rolling existence. "I've always wanted to see the pyramids in Egypt," someone might say. Or "Wouldn't it be incredible to walk around Paris at night?"

"A dream vacation is a heightened experience," says Michael Brein, a Honolulu-based writer who studies the psychology of travel. "It's not reality."

Not only are the dream locales bigger, brighter and more profound, so are the travellers who finally get to see them - at least in their own minds, he says. In other words, it's not you walking through a crevasse on a caving expedition, you're Indiana Jones exploring an undiscovered underworld.

But like my ill-fated journey, some just fall apart. A couple of months ago, a dream vacation took a horrible turn when an American diver and her British boyfriend resurfaced far from their tour boat off the coast of Australia. Minutes turned to hours. Night came. Dehydrated and hypothermic, they were rescued 19 hours later.

That's the problem with dream vacations: Although the Australian story is an extreme example, most dream trips cannot possibly hope to match our Technicolor expectations. Travellers get sick, the locals are rude, the resort is not as advertised or it rains 11 days in a row. That's just

life - and its infinite potential for disillusionment.

Yet some journeys turn out to be even better than expected. Heather Wright of Kitchener, Ont., saw the John Wayne movie *Hatari* (which means "danger" in Swahili) as a kid and simply couldn't forget the beauty of the African landscape, the people or the animals.

At 39, when she found herself in coronary care, she came to the realization that she simply had to go to Africa on safari. A few months later, she and a friend were bumping along rutted tracks in a 4-by-4, coming so close to lions, wildebeest and a leopard that she couldn't get the latter entirely in a picture. She had to go into debt to pay for the trip, but she says it was worth it.

"It was magic. The whole thing was magic," she says, adding that she didn't feel the horrible post-trip letdown that many people experience after they return home. "I just wanted to go back."

Sometimes it's not the location but the chance to show it to someone you love that makes a vacation dream material. Dale Mills of Guelph, Ont., plans to introduce his 12-year-old son, Tristan, to his own travel passion, the Arctic. The two have already been to the "Dinosaur Capital of the World," Drumheller, Alta., and have seen the history-making biodiversity of the Galapagos Islands. But while Mills has been north of 60 almost a dozen times, he's still excited about sharing it with his son.

"We've gone on a few dream trips together, but I want him to experience the Canadian North," he says.

Amanda Pressner, author of the forthcoming book *The Lost Girls*, discovered the importance of travelling with people you love after ditching swishy media jobs in New York and roaming the world with two girlfriends, planning only one country ahead for the whole year they were gone.

"I didn't expect these two women would change from being just the girlfriends I hung out with in New York to being something else. It's a war-buddy sort of bond. You know you have these two people for the rest of your life," she says.

IT'S ALL SO GREAT

I'm happy to share Club Med with my children too. My five-year-old son is doing yoga with his fellow "geckos" at the Mini Club Med day camp across the way. My daughter, Nadia, has just ordered a Shirley Temple. She's a one-year-old beauty who was diagnosed last year with hydrocephalus - too much fluid around the brain. I didn't start giving my son soda until just a few months ago, but the way I'm feeling today, I figure it's okay if she wants to live a little.

The resort is gorgeous. After my night of sweats and aches, I finally, weakly, venture out onto the grounds to explore. If I was in a better mindset, I would drink in the regal palm trees dotting the grounds, the ocean beyond, the thatched roofs, the mango tree laden with fruit beside the pool and the ethereal music piped in around the property. Sunbathers lounge around the pool and on the beach on king-sized, covered daybeds with coral throw pillows.

But I feel so guilty sitting in the middle of this beauty while all hell breaks loose back home. So after a couple of days we go online in our room and pay \$2,000 for plane tickets to take us home.

"You came back," my mother says when she sees me walk into her hospital room the morning after our flight home. "They told me you were coming back."

I smile at her, trying to erase any visible shock at seeing her so weak, her face an expressionless mask created by the cocktail of painkillers pumped into her body.

"I'd rather see you than some stupid sunset," I say, leaning down to hug her. The words sound utterly inane next to the sorrow mixed with gratitude welling inside me. "I'd rather see you any day."

We hold hands for a long time. I stroke her hair. Apply lipstick to her mouth. I have made it home for the only two days she is lucid enough to speak the words she needs to say, hear the words I have to tell her.

Six days after my return, surrounded by photos of her own dream trip to Scotland, she dies. Her final, solo journey to a place she has always dreamed she would go. And the only place I cannot follow.

Recommend this article? 163 votes

[View the most recommended](#)