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GIRLS' GETAWAY

Women across the country are leaving family behind for shopping, spas and cruises
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Listen up ladies.

Women of all ages — single, married, divorced, widowed, mothers, daughters and sisters — are hitting the road.

Data from a new survey released by the American Automobile Association and Aspire Innovative Learning shows that 24 percent of American women have taken a girlfriend getaway with family and friends in the past three years, and 39 percent of American women plan on taking one in the next three years.



Photo by McClatchy Newspapers

Women across the country are leaving family behind for shopping, spas and cruises

Marybeth Bond, an award-winning author and editor of nine travel books, including 50 Best Girlfriend Getaways in North America, says women in the United States took 32 million trips in 2006, making them a driving force in the travel industry. She also states that current estimates show women will spend some \$125 billion on travel in the next year.

Further studies show these getaways account for 4 percent of all U.S. travel spending; almost \$200 million a year in hotels alone, according to Renie Cavallari, Aspire's CEO. The most common destinations include the beach (66 percent), going to the spa (63 percent), taking a shopping trip (55 percent) or taking a cruise (51 percent). While the destination and accommodations are important, the women in the study made it quite clear that just getting away to spend time bonding with their female friends and family was what mattered most.

Leslie Cruz of Keedysville and a longtime friend recently pack their bags and headed for Rocky Gap Resort and Spa near Cumberland. "It was prompted by us discussing that our husbands get away, just guys, for fishing or camping and we never do anything just women," said Cruz.

As a D.C. attorney, she is always working against deadlines with clients who demand nothing but the best. Stress takes its toll after awhile getting away — even for just a few days — has a way of rejuvenating the soul. After a weekend of hiking and relaxing spa treatments, the two friends know their first girl's getaway certainly won't be their last.

"We've never done anything like this before," said Cruz. "I had a ball, and I'd definitely do it again. After the weekend away, I felt rejuvenated and energized, although I could have used one more day — three instead of two."

This need to de-stress, felt by both women, confirms the report's findings — that getaways are growing, in part, because American women feel the need to escape their personal and professional responsibilities. The report also shows that vacations including just girlfriends and female family members ease stress and have become an important part of the lives of American women.

"The experience of a girlfriend getaway has a deep effect on the lives and friendships of women who take these trips," said Ragina C. Averella, Public and Government Affairs Manager for AAA Mid-Atlantic. "Many believe that going away with their girlfriends is important, regardless of the destination. In fact, I recently took such a vacation. Although I missed my family, the bonding and friendship that comes from such a vacation is quite rewarding."

This past June, Emily Hood and Meghan Schnur, both elementary teachers in Walkersville, spent a weekend away with scrapbook company Creative Memories.

"Meg and I met at school this year and had a quick connection as colleagues," said Hood. "Passing in the hallway one morning, we discovered we were both into scrapbooking. When we found out about the weekend escape, it was a no-brainer."

For Hood and Schnur — both fulltime teachers and mothers of young children — the trip couldn't have been timed better.

"The trip came at the end of the school year which is always stressful for teachers," said Hood. "And, this year was no exception. Actually, it ranks in the top."

Not only was this trip a weekend to relax and catch-up on their scrap booking, it was also a weekend to bond and learn more about one another.

"We'd only known each other for one year," said Schnur. "On this trip, we got to know one another better. We realized we have a lot of similar interests, other than scrapbooking. It really strengthened our relationship."

Hood likens the weekend to a slumber party of 20 years ago.

"After we had decided to call it a night and go to bed we stayed up in the dark talking for another hour. The weekend away was a great escape from reality. We got to do two of our favorite things — scrapbook and socialize. We were able to stay up late, sleep in the next morning and not have to be accountable to anyone but ourselves."

Like the women in this story, the women in the study shared how important these trips are for them, saying they feel more self-confident, adventurous and relaxed as a result of their getaway. These escapes are a time for women to share common experiences, strengthen bonds and get validation and acceptance from their female friends and family.

While girl time is special, husbands, significant others and children of these women shouldn't feel abandoned. The study found that only 34 percent of women gave "break from significant other" as the reason for a getaway. And, when they're away, they do talk about you. Seventy-nine percent admitted that men or their significant other are the most frequently talked about topics.

While a girl's getaway may be just what you're looking for, don't feel bad if you can't make it happen right away. It's hard finding a time that works for everyone and selecting a trip that fits everyone's budget. Fifty-six percent of all women surveyed said they have yet to make plans for a future girlfriend getaway.

But, remember — try not to be too particular. Even if you can't afford your ideal destination, there are lots of local places to choose from. Try a day of hiking in western Maryland, followed by an overnight stay at one of the many quaint bed and breakfasts. If the outdoors leaves you less than thrilled, head into D.C. to tour the museums, catch a show and be pampered at one of the swanky five-star hotels. If an overnight is out of the question right now, at least plan on spending a full-day relaxing and doing something you enjoy with the girls. After-all, isn't that what it's all about?