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Leaving The Men At Home

For Many Women, Dropping Family Burdens Makes For A Real Vacation

By Dan Wright

HARRISONBURG — Cathy Welsh has been going on girlfriend getaways for about 10 years.

It started as girls' weekends and evolved into weeklong vacations with six or seven college friends.

An attorney with Lenhart Obenshain PC, Welsh values the trips for the time to reconnect with friends.

"It's really a nice getaway," Welsh said. "When you vacation with family, you're still the wife and mother and you're still doing the cooking and cleaning."

A new study indicates that vacations involving women and their girlfriends or women family members are an important part of the travel industry.

Conducted by AAA and Aspire Marketing, the report found that 24 percent of American women have taken a girlfriend getaway in the past three years, and 39 percent of American women plan to take one in the next three years.

The most popular destinations include beaches, shopping trips and cruises.

But the survey said that destination is incidental to the primary purpose of a girlfriend getaway: spending time with women friends and family.

Escape And Bond

Escape from daily responsibilities and bonding are the top reasons women take girlfriend getaways, the AAA survey said.

"We've all had different trials and tribulations, easy or hard times with pregnancy and raising children," Welsh said. "Some of us had parents who have died. So it's a mix of hanging out, having fun and in-depth conversations about life and how we're doing."

Girlfriend getaways are a sign of the times, AAA spokeswoman Martha Meade said.

The getaways are not only popular, but also necessary, because women are under increasing pressure at work and at home, she said.

"We don't have the time to sit and girl-talk. We need to get away and nurture those relationships," Meade said. "Women realize it's important to look out for their own needs."

Filling those needs has become a significant part of the travel economy.

Girlfriend getaways rang up \$28 billion last year, about 4 percent of the nation's \$703 billion leisure travel spending, according to D.K. Shifflet & Associates Ltd., a Falls Church-based market research firm.

Estimating the growth of girlfriend getaways is difficult because this is AAA's first such survey, Meade said.

"It's a fairly new trend," she added.

A Weekend, Then A Week

Welsh and her friends have been getting away together for 10 years.

Joann Shaver didn't realize, as her daughter, Jamie Shaver March told her, that they had gotten away together at least six times in the past decade.

It started with Shaver and her sister, Theresa Knapp, going to the beach for a weekend.

"Then we went for a week," Shaver said. "Then the girls got older and we started taking them."

With the two sisters, their daughters and granddaughters, this getaway has eight or nine women and girls.

Shaver and her husband have been on vacations together "all over the U.S.," she said. "And we still take vacations with the husbands."

But the girls' getaways are a different type of time away.

Marsh described the vacations as doing all the things that none of the husbands enjoy, like lounging on the beach and shopping the boardwalk.

They economize, with two women and two or three girls in each room, she added.

It's unusual when all nine can arrange schedules. This year, a wedding put the getaway on hold.

But each year when spring arrives, Shaver gets beach fever, the phone calls and schedule juggling begin.

"It's making great memories for me," Marsh said. "[It] gives me a chance to learn more about my mother as a fun-loving person, not just as a parent."

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Among the Shaver clan women who vacation together every year are (left to right) Pepsi Coleman, Bryce Coleman, 10, Mollie Coleman, 4, Joann Shaver, Abbey Coleman, 6, and Jamie Shaver Marsh. They enjoy weeklong girls' getaways, "and we still take vacations with the husbands," adds Shaver.

Photo by Nikki Fox