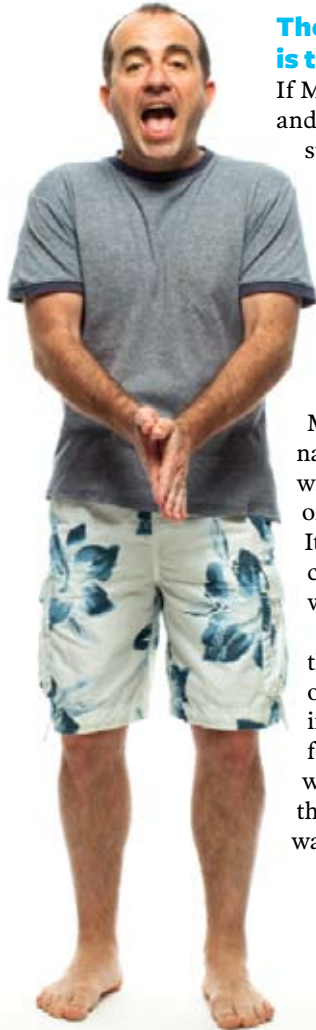


Summer holidays

Marty Wilson shares eight life lessons for keeping it together on your family's annual break



The litmus test for your family's health is the drive to your holiday destination.

If Mum, Dad, four kids (two of them carsick) and two beagles can cram into a car containing three suitcases, six Cabbage Patch dolls, two cricket sets, four fishing rods, a My Little Pony stable and 50 books that won't get read, then crawl through five hours of Boxing Day traffic and still climb out at the other end with everyone in one piece, your family is doing OK.

On holiday, the best memories come from the catastrophes.

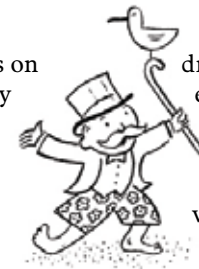
Most of us only get a few weeks off a year so it's natural we want them to go perfectly. But what two- or three- or four-week block of life has no problems whatsoever? It's lucky that the inevitable catastrophes are the very things we reminisce about years later.

I have only the vaguest memory of the 27 days when my family relaxed on the beach, gazing idly at parasailing in the background. But none of us can forget the one day every single summer when some poor sap's towline broke and the frantic parasailor headed out to sea, waving hysterically.

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Family illness was always on the agenda, too. Our holiday block of eight units had eight families and their diseases living and playing with each other. Every second year a vomiting bug would go through the building, often followed by the Port Stephens Poos. And one time I remember glancing up at our block, seeing mums searching kids' hair for lice on five out of the eight balconies.



drinking), we moved enthusiastically on to Balderdash, in which you make up word definitions. I have vivid memories (well, vividish, it was 2am) of my brother convincing us all that "forfend" was "the tassel at the corner of the trimming on the hat worn by Spanish conquistadors". Its real meaning ("to protect or prevent") has always seemed a bit of a let-down.

If you can even half afford to buy a beach shack, DO IT!

Buy it now. Even if holidays will be in a flea-ridden shack with no running water except rising damp, situated in a tiny hamlet surrounded by scrubby bush containing nothing but snakes, leeches and (rumour has it) werewolves. By the time your kids are old enough to drive, that dump will be prime real estate where a seven-figure price tag is a bargain. Buy it now and your kids will worship you forever.

Board games are best when played on holiday.

Our holiday flat had a sideboard full of games we would never play at home. But with sandy feet, Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit and Scrabble came into their own. As we grew into adults (ie, began

You don't meet better people on holiday, you just meet them at their best.

When you're standing watching the surf, wearing nothing but a straw hat and a pair of budgie smugglers, there's no room for pretensions. And that's the magic. No-one knows who you are so you can just be yourself.

Of course it's expensive; you're on holiday.

Like all holiday spots in the 1970s, Shoal Bay in New South Wales had a run-down little weatherboard corner store.

We called it Blackmarket Bertha's because the owner knew hers was the only shop open for kilometres and took full advantage by tripling the prices. She's still there, although the shop is a



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handsome two-storey brick palazzo. You just have to laugh as she hands you a cappuccino and says, without blinking, “That’s \$6.50, thanks.”

Grandparents will undermine your authority.

I was only five, but I can still recall the only shouting match I ever heard my dad have with his father-in-law, Donny. Our beloved grandfather had given us some extra soft drink (or some equally horrendous crime). I heard Dad sigh with exasperation, and say, “Sometimes, Donny, you *do* have to say no to them.”

Now I’m a parent of two young boys and I’m terrified to take my parents on holidays because they’re softer touches than Donny ever was. At home there’s a reasonably consistent set of rewards and punishments (ie, a complex system of bribes). But when my kids ask for an ice-cream halfway through their tea, my dad blurts out “Great idea”. Then there’s the sneaky treats, late-night videos and double helpings of jelly.

It’s total anarchy.

Once, thinking I had

the ultimate trump card, I reminded Dad of the comment I’d overheard him make to Donny all those years ago. He laughed and asked if I’d heard my grandfather’s response. Well, no, actually. “Donny taught me a lot,” said Dad. “When I told him to say no every now and then, he said, “You’re their dad, that’s your job. I’m their grandfather: it’s my job to spoil them rotten.” There’s no fighting the Circle of Life. Bring on my grandkids!

Bring your luggage, leave your baggage.

When you’re with your family, be with your family. Don’t try to kid yourself that it’s OK to take your work mobile or laptop away, reasoning you’ll “only check it once a day”. I’ve tried; it just doesn’t work. And don’t pretend to listen to the kids chattering about crabs while you’re secretly adding up the cost of everything.

If you want to create wonderful, loving family memories, your brain needs to be in singlet-and-thongs mode, not just your body. Your kids don’t care if they eat sausages every day for a week wearing half-clean boardies under cloudy skies. They just want endless days to hang out with you, and eventually their own kids will want the same of them.

Have a great holiday. After the GFC, we’ve all earned it. ■

Marty

