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How to Overcome Middle-Age Traveler's Guilt

No matter where you travel, all roads lead home, but everyone needs a break

By Tracie Haywood Saunders, AARP
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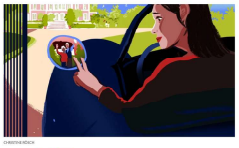

CHRISTINE ROSCH

I watched the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean from the luxurious Cliff House in Cape Neddick, Maine, on a Tuesday morning, a full hour before it came up at home in North Carolina. As I listened to the waves crash against the rocky coastline, so different from the flat, Southern beaches that I'm used to, it could have been another planet. I noticed different colored buoys signifying lobster traps. The presence of the traps, which weren't there the previous night, was proof I wasn't the only one crazy enough to be up at this hour. That's when I started thinking of Daddy at home. He was probably getting ready to go to the blueberry patch to start picking before the heat kicked in, and I should be helping him.

For me, the guilt usually starts to set about four days into a trip. A feeling that no matter how good a time I'm having, there is something important I'm supposed to be doing at home. I try to brush it away by checking out nearby tourist attractions and local must-dos, but the feeling still lingers. It's the quiet times when everyone is still sleeping that the feeling is the strongest.

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"Middle-aged adults often face unique responsibilities that make it hard to step away from home," says Ryan Sultan, M.D., a psychiatrist and therapist at Integrative Psych, a holistic psychiatric and psychotherapy clinic. "They may be caregivers for aging parents while also supporting children, sometimes financially or emotionally. This 'sandwich generation' dynamic can lead to feelings of guilt when taking personal time for travel. There's also the concern that leaving loved ones, even temporarily, might seem selfish or neglectful, despite good intentions."

While at Cliff House in Maine, the writer started feeling guilty about being away from her family in North Carolina.

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The sandwich generation

According to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey, about a quarter of U.S. adults (23 percent) are now part of the so-called sandwich generation. Pew defines these adults as having a parent 65 or older and either raising a child younger than 18 or providing financial support to an adult child.

"Parent care presents a psychological dilemma – the adult child is faced with the confusing role of caring for the people who are supposed to care for them, which can lead to feelings of anger and frustration followed by guilt and shame," says Gary Small, M.D., chair of psychiatry at Hackensack University Medical Center and author of more than a dozen books on brain health.

Family obligations are the greatest source of traveler's guilt for me. My daddy is not a traveler. If he had his way, none of us would leave the hill that we live on, atop the same road that my grandparents, uncles and cousins have lived on for longer than anyone can remember. Daddy never wanted to live anywhere other than our home in rural Montgomery County, North Carolina, a contentment that is some ways I envy. Once he returned home after being drafted into the Army in 1967, he never wanted to leave again.

These days while I worry more about my parents, now in their late 70s, when I'm away from home, that has not always been the main source of my traveler's guilt. My daughter is 12 now, but I remember just a few years ago she was my primary concern whenever I traveled anywhere without her.

I distinctly remember a long weekend trip to Charleston with my husband when my daughter was a toddler. We left her with my parents while we took a rare couple's trip. I literally started crying when it was close to bedtime, and I wouldn't be there to tuck her in. Now, she travels with us more times than not, but occasionally we leave her with family when we travel. At 12 years old, the anguish is not as extreme, but still, in the back of my mind, there is a tiny pang of guilt.

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When I talk with other friends and acquaintances in their 40s and 50s, I hear many of the same issues that I feel. In many ways, talking about the concerns we share over traveling without our parents or children validate my own feelings for the need for some downtime. It also reminds me I'm not facing the issue alone. The balance between self-care and caring for our loved ones is tricky, and constantly evolving as our parents and children grow older.

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I like Daddy. I love to wander to new places, even if I must endure a little guilt I often need the break, and each place reminds me of home in some way. According to Small, that is probably a good thing. "If the caregiver has not come to terms with such unresolved mental challenges, they will suffer and likely experience guilt about taking time for themselves on a vacation," he says. "To provide the best care, adult children need to take breaks to recharge their emotional batteries lest they burn out and get stressed."

The writer and her family traveled to Cooperstown, New York. Clockwise from left, Trudy, Jeff and Peyton Saunders.

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Destination: Guilt Free

I recently visited New England and upstate New York for the first time and was enamored by the region. The Fly Creek Cider Mill & Orchard just outside of Cooperstown, New York, took me back to visits to Mingus Mill in the Smoky Mountains with my parents and Mawdonsville's many apple orchards. Funspot, which is known as the world's largest arcade with classic games in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, evoked memories of playing skeeball and pinball with my cousins at the pavilion at Goldstein's Beach at White Lake. Even the names of places like Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, the historic Revolutionary towns near Boston, sounded like home, just without the barbecue and race cars.

Some places like Lexington, Massachusetts, reminded the writer of home. Here, the Lexington Minuteman statue.

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"Research consistently shows that vacations reduce stress, improve mental health and promote overall well-being," Sultan says. "Taking a break allows individuals to decompress and return with greater patience and energy, benefiting not just the traveler but their family as well."

Small agrees. "Knowing that your own self-care is critically important to providing optimal care for your loved ones is key to minimizing feelings of nonsense about taking much needed time away from everyday responsibilities."

No matter where I travel, there is still a feeling besides the guilt that there was back home. Dorothy Gale from The Wizard of Oz may have been from Kansas, but she figured out the answer long ago — there's no place like home. Perhaps Daddy had it right all along – there are places with less humidity, more things to do and certainly less insects, but there is never one that will replace home. Still a little respite certainly makes the return sweeter.

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Tips for dealing with the guilt

Sultan provides the following pointers for overcoming traveler's guilt.

1. Share the benefits. Talk openly with your family about how the trip can help you recharge. Chances are your parents remember what it's like to be overwhelmed working parents who need a break. A gentle reminder that you need a little time to yourself to recharge can go a long way.

2. Schedule times to connect during the trip. Staying in contact periodically helps ease anxiety for everyone. A gentle reminder that communication is limited in some areas is helpful, too.

3. Balance solo and family travel. Alternate between vacations with loved

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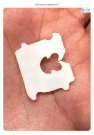

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