

DANIELA CORTOLEZIS

**STAYCATION
OR THE JOYS
OF GARDEN
HOLIDAYS**

BECAUSE GARDENS MAKE US HAPPY

The greatest danger when spending your holidays at home is that you just keep on doing what you always do. But there is another way. A road movie on the brink of madness, en route to the most beautiful holiday destination on earth and the utter bliss to be found amongst deckchairs and secateurs.

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For

*Candidus, Sebastian, Vilja, Julia, Georg, Nikolaus,
Giulia, Candidus Maximilian, Leander, Filippo, Livia,
Anna, Charlotte, Helena, Nora.*

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Holidays at Last – The Eternal Dilemma

*“I wish I had ...
I wish I was...
I wish I could...”*

Holiday-time is the best of all times, unless you’ve caught the gardening bug. Then you’ll be all too aware of the annual dilemma. It’s the same drama every year:

Holidays at last. The family is all excited. Chaos descends days before departure. Who is taking what, where and how, and when to leave to ensure the greatest possible holiday experience. On the day, the car is crammed full of suitcases, holdalls, carrier bags. By the time the food for the journey is stowed away, cleaning wipes are within easy reach, bicycles are in their respective slots on the roof rack and cuddly toys and plastic animals are jammed into all available spaces, you know there’s no chance of leg movement until the first stop at a motorway service station. The children are strapped in and settle into their habitual whining. The driver programs the satnav, tears his hair out, supervises the loading of his vehicle, starts to throw fits and casts severe doubt upon the mental state of his loved ones who appear to be unable to conceive of a holiday without this veritable flood of stuff. All are getting into their customary best-time-of-the-year mood.

All, except for one: the lady gardener, the mother, the tormented one. She stands by the gate, aghast, turns

to look at her garden one last time and surreptitiously wipes a salty tear from her cheek. Finally going on holiday, finally setting off, that's great. Wonderful, in fact. But who will look after the garden?

And she begins to dream.

Of an alternative kind of holiday, at home, in her own garden. How amazing it would be to be able to revel in nothing but garden time, concerned with nothing but gardening matters. And herself. Taking time out from everyday stress in her green oasis, leisurely reading all those new novels and maybe even doing something creative again.

Wouldn't it be lovely to walk out every morning across the dewy meadow, barefoot, still in a nightgown, holding a deliciously aromatic cup of coffee, to check on the roses. To fish the newspaper out of the letterbox and read it in comfort beneath the apple tree, lingering over the news, and then to take your first stroll around the garden to water the plants. To roll out your yoga mat in the shade and salute the sun surrounded by all this nature. That would be amazing!

And I continue to dream for a moment longer... because the lady gardener by the gate, that's me!

A slave to my garden. No wonder worrying about the garden always puts a considerable damper on the joys of travelling just before we are due to leave. Which, depending on the lady gardener's temper and emotion-

al state, might at times degenerate into hysterics. And yet, it could be so wonderful!

When summer days become endless and feel like an excursion into Alpine pastures, when a refreshing immersion deep into the forest enables us to breathe more easily, or our gaze magically lingers on marguerites and poppies. When a hint of freedom is in the air and we are suddenly released from everything that usually weighs us down. Those are the days that sadly pass much too quickly – days I would love to last for the entire year.

That can't happen, though, which is why I'm somewhat fussy when it comes to going away just when everything is at its most beautiful.

But now – I'm almost waking up from my daydream – holiday-time is mercilessly upon me.

It's time to close the garden gate behind me, allow myself a few days of rest and, like every year, take to the road because, as Kurt Tucholsky said: Travelling is a longing for life.

He didn't, however, mention anything about a longing for gardens. Not that I'd want to give the impression that we gardeners don't ever want to travel. Quite to the contrary. In fact, we all want to use our precious holidays in the most meaningful ways possible. Which, for most of us, brings to mind images of a relaxing time-out. We want to spend those days in inspiring and exciting ways, we want to regain our strength and get

some peace. We dream of finally having enough time for ourselves, so that we can recharge our batteries. Then again, we also want to be active and to feel centred and alive. Like we do when we move around our garden, tirelessly and full of energy. We want it all, and we want it all at once. Except for one thing: we don't want to neglect our garden.

Whichever way I look at it: as a dedicated gardener I have to confess that I would prefer to stay home during the summer. I would prefer to holiday in my garden, and not just so I can enjoy it. The mere thought of being away during the height of the flowering season is enough to turn me into a bad-tempered nervous wreck.

I startle awake for a moment to ask myself why on earth the hydrangeas have to flower so beautifully now that we are about to leave, why today has to be so hot that it won't be long until the garden turns into a desert of hard-baked clay in the scorching heat, and why I have to leave today...

Who on earth will water the garden while I'm away?

I know hardly anyone who'd go on holiday without a care and leave their garden to its own devices, without even a whiff of a guilty conscience.

Even if there is the back-up of helpful family members or a lovely gardening friend prepared to do their best.

Because even then, it's not always easy to hand the garden over. At least not without having made a com-

prehensive list to cover all eventualities of interim garden care. Not without torturing the long-suffering faithful soul saying things like: “The roses really love it when you...” and sometimes even offending them, because if she’s a true gardening friend, she’ll know the score already. About the plants as well as the departing gardener’s state of mind.

But a lady gardener can never be absolutely certain. She’ll want to be prepared and not possibly allow the worst to come to the worst, and so she must not overlook even the slightest little thing since the gardening help will only come by every few days to make sure things are alright. And that’ll have to do – one doesn’t after all want to make a fuss. And so, now would be an ideal time to relax a little.

But whether I like it or not, some anxious thoughts simply will not be shifted. Instead, they add to the already substantial mix of gardening-care disaster-potential an extra portion of worry and panic about elemental forces. There might be a garden-withering heat wave while I’m on holiday. Systems of extreme high or low pressure such as Alf and Xaver have become utterly unpredictable, and thunderstorms, hurricanes and gale-force winds could happen at any time. It would be naïve to disregard this. Such a storm could happen anywhere, blast across the land, devastate the garden and destroy everything. With nature being completely out of control, such a place of beauty would probably not stand a chance without the lady gardener there to keep it safe from harm. This worry

about the garden being helplessly at the mercy of elemental forces goes straight to the heart. The lady gardener threatens to be overwhelmed by pangs of conscience. Thousands of horror scenarios, grim prognoses and less-than-rosy expectations race through one's mind when holiday-time comes along, and they all end with: "I wish I was ..."

But it's too late now, the family glaring reproachfully through the open windows, muttering the obligatory setting-off mantra: "Mum is always last..." But sometimes it just goes in one ear and out the other.

Every year the same drama. I can just see myself again, during prime gardening time of all things, frying in the sweltering heat, on an overcrowded beach that smells of suntan lotion rather than roses. Trotting around the endless streets of a foreign city until my feet give out, or dragging through the whole blessed day, away from it all. Naturally, when I'm on holiday, I would love to see other countries, explore cities on my own or just do nothing. Because that's what it's like, my inner holiday ticker and leisure-time programming device that ultimately sends me travelling again, year after year. I have to leave my garden behind, all alone, even though I would rather lean towards thoughts such as "not without my garden".

Interestingly, even if the planned trip takes me to distant places for a few days only – trust me, staying closer-by isn't a viable alternative – this doesn't make

it feel any better. Abandoning the garden leaves a stale taste that sticks to me like chewing gum.

It may surprise you to learn that this wistfulness is likely to be somewhat one-sided. Even though I'm finding it really hard to leave my garden behind for the duration of a holiday, I sometimes secretly suspect that my garden really doesn't care all that much. It does its thing, with and without a gardener, and doesn't appear to take any notice at all of my plans. My garden flowers as and when it pleases, always without checking with me first. If I were a doomster, I'd be pretty sure that the garden just waits for me to get out of sight before it pulls out all the stops. Before it proliferates, grows wild, throws garden gate and door wide open to the annual invasion of the common fleabane and all its mates. As though the garden longed for a few quiet holi-days too, light-hearted and free of its helicopter gardener, whose heart breaks every time she leaves and who, faced with the idea of possibly missing the season's most beautiful flowering, bursts into tears.

This is, of course, utter nonsense because, even if one stays put, some of those beauties wither right in front of our eyes. You should see my magnolia stellata. Fresh, snow-white and neat in its flower shape, it flowers at about the speed of a passing express train. No sooner has a tiny star flower appeared than you'll find it, faded and listless, on the ground. Supposing I'm at home but not at the right place at the right time, I still risk missing it all, because those tiny stars put on big airs and graces and the flowers last for a minute period

of time only. And that's the snag – because this scenario reminds me, quite brutally, how transitory everything is, how quickly the best time in the garden passes. And now I'm sure you can imagine how I feel when I turn my back on the garden.

Torn away from my thoughts with a loud “Can we get going now?” I climb onto the passenger seat, across the stacks of holiday reading matter wedged in by my feet, and the journey begins. With lots of books that I intend to read under the sunshade, if not in my garden then on the white sand, on the seashore. Where I might well realize that La Dolce Vita resides somewhere else altogether...

La Dolce Vita – Holidays in Your Own Garden

Enjoying days off in your own garden – what a delicious idea! An alternative holiday programme that can be implemented at the drop of a hat. No packing, no last-minute shopping sprees and no hysterical hunt for mislaid passports. Not to mention the exhausting journey to get there. Instead, a holiday with life's beautiful pleasures, with creativity and flow. Just think of all the things you could do right there, in your very own green space!

And just like that I'm caught up in imagining how wonderful it would be to stay put in my wild summer garden and spend my holidays at home, being creative. A few days of nothing but gardening pleasure. I'll go to a place I already know, staying at home in my green oasis and pampering my garden of paradise good and proper. I'll weed and snip and, of course, do a lot of watering. Because a helicopter gardener such as me always has her work cut out. And who knows, maybe the garden looks forward to me just a little bit after all. Me, I can hardly wait to spend my entire time there! At the end of the day I'm sure it'll reward me with enchanting flowers and lush greenery. And if not, I can always help things along a bit. Because we lady gardeners aren't just busy bees – we can also be pretty cunning when required. And it's always required.

In any case, such a garden holiday is a brilliant alternative to long-distance holidays with their pre-

determined guilty conscience. I would finally have the time to see what it's like to paint in the garden. To set up a little studio and feel like Monet in Giverny. Without water lilies, maybe, but instead I'll be looking at gorgeous hollyhocks and sumptuous hydrangeas in deep shades of pink and blue. I could get to know my three new camera lenses and begin to experiment with them. Aiming to follow in the footsteps of photographer Inge Morath and maybe one day take a photo as ingenious as the one of the llama looking out of an open car window in Times Square, New York. You might think that this was a lucky snapshot, but in fact it was the result of several days' worth of photo shootings by said photographer. Me, I would rather scout around the world of tiny creatures and home in on subjects such as ants, bees or frogs. Snakes, not so much.

I also really like the idea of a daily practice of new asanas, which is what yoga poses are called in yoganista world, outdoors on the green lawn that I would mow especially for this purpose. To get me back into the pleasures of the once-familiar yoga flow and persuade my body with gentle pressure to request an invigorating session every day. On an ongoing basis. I could refresh my language skills while doing some menial tasks in the garden. I could make another effort to write those morning pages I started months ago, a way to soothe the unsettled mind and shift all atmospheric disturbances like blockages out of the way so that one's day can be successful. By writing. Wouldn't that be great!

And whenever the garden needs me, I am, conveniently, already there. I could water it at any time. That would be a wonderful holiday. That's how you holiday in your garden. However, it's useful to set some restrictions, and to change the rules, too. The supreme principle is: Garden Holidays, but without doing all the stuff we normally do all day long – no shopping, cleaning or cooking.

There are exceptions, of course. A creative cookery project, or a writing project. Or maybe both. Take, for example, my friend S. who wrote a cookery book for her loved ones by collecting delicious family recipes that she then arranged, lovingly illustrated, and made into a book. An organic gardener and keen cook, she can be found out in the garden all year long, with her chickens, sheep, dog, cat and grandchildren. She grows all her own vegetables and prepares her meals according to the seasons. The recipes are seasonal, too, and she has written them out by hand in the shelter of an arbour in her garden, dedicated to her family in form of a book.

If I was lucky enough to have an outdoor kitchen in my garden, I'd have the perfect reason to enjoy standing at the stove. Cooking meals out in the open air in your own garden-kitchen – what an extraordinary experience that would be! In some gardens the ingredients, lovingly and organically tended by the chef, practically grow straight into the pot.

I feel like I'm on cloud nine when I'm in such a magical garden space. Dreaming of long nights at end-

less white-clothed tables groaning under the weight of freshly harvested garden delicacies. Where music plays, wine flows freely, crickets chirrup happily, and the festivities seem never-ending. La Dolce Vita!

“I’m hungry! I’m thirsty!” Yelling assaults my left ear from the back and makes me jump. Out of the lovely, culinary feast, where I found myself pondering what it is that inspires lady gardeners...