

## Doctor's Orders: Life's Healthier with Travel and Play Breaks

By Erwin J. Tan

In many industrialized countries, we accept the value of play and travel in youth. We understand that for young people, it promotes physical activity, stress reduction, creativity, social connections, and personal development. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has affirmed that every child has a “right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child.”<sup>1</sup>

faraway places ranging from the opposite coast (San Francisco) to across the ocean (Italy) to join us in Washington, DC, in a space at AARP headquarters called the Hatchery designed for innovation. The unprecedented day, filled with exploration and discussion, ended on a unique note, with some thought leaders hopping into kayaks and others reconnecting with croquet.



Ebony Andrews describes how GirlTrek has inspired 160,000 women to commit to 30 minutes of self-care a day through walking.

Yet, in fact, the benefits of play and travel are relevant across all ages and are important for health as we age. At AARP, we believe that play — in the form of sports, hobbies or daily walks, or travel in the form of vacations and long weekends — has tremendous potential to support a vibrant and healthy life.

In October, thought leaders in the areas of play and travel flew from

### Backed by Research

Putting together the event was AARP's Thought Leadership group, which led the exploration of scientific evidence supporting the event's very name, “Health Benefits of Travel and Play for Grownups.” Alison Bryant, senior vice president of research at AARP, strengthened the case, sharing new survey research from AARP showing that people

report a range of benefits from travel, from feeling more relaxed to experiencing strengthened relationships.

“Play is fundamental,” said Bryant. “It is fundamental to life and learning. And we hear this all the time when it comes to kids. Our idea is that we should really be talking about this across the lifespan.”

This, of course, all fits seamlessly into AARP's broader work. As a part of AARP's work to disrupt aging by supporting people in living the way they want as they age, we seek to support people of all ages in travel and play.

Play is what psychologists call an intrinsic motivator. It is satisfying and can be especially effective in supporting regular behavior that can otherwise be difficult to sustain, such as physical activity. Play and travel are especially powerful because they are inspirational and offer opportunities to develop cultural awareness and retrain at midlife for a new career rather than retiring. When, at age 36, I returned to Indonesia, my country of birth, for the first time since I was an infant, the travel inspired me to be closer to my parents and more mindful of my life goals to start a family. As people live longer, increasingly to 100,<sup>2</sup> they are seeking more than just the necessities of life — they aspire to discover, to play, and to connect. In the “blue zones” (regions of the world where people are more likely to live to 100<sup>3</sup>) it is more common to see people walking and biking to town, and integrating healthy behaviors into their leisure and work.

Does it matter what kind of vacation you take? Participants in the AARP event considered that question. Elissa Epel of the University of California at San Francisco discussed the “vacation effect” shown in a study that randomized participants in either a relaxing poolside resort experience or a mindful meditation retreat.<sup>4</sup> Which group did better after six days? Both groups showed similar changes in gene expression related to reduced chronic stress. However, those who practiced mindfulness had prolonged benefits, lasting up to 10 months. So, while a mindfulness retreat may provide lasting take-home tools, both forms of getaways are good for you.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway, then, is simply this: Don't skip the vacation. Sure enough, women who skip vacations feel more stress and tend to develop heart disease sooner.<sup>5</sup> While further research is needed to determine the health benefits of different play and travel experiences, there is evidence that what is important is getting away. This is the first step.

### Opportunities and Disparities

The benefits of play and travel should not be limited to those who can afford a six-day wellness retreat. Participants at the AARP event agreed that people of all ages and backgrounds need access to new travel and play experiences. Fran Mainella, former director of the US National Park Service, discussed how public lands are a gateway to healthy living. Jiminy Wickets founder James Creasey described a resoundingly successful intergenerational croquet program that links high school students and residents of assisted living facilities.

GirlTrek Field Producer Ebony Andrews, meanwhile, described how the organization helps black women take charge of their health by addressing barriers to play for many people, such as the lack of access to our public lands. GirlTrek has taken hundreds of women to the Rockies, allowing them to experience for the first time the immense natural beauty of the mountains. Many women, Andrews noted, may think of a vacation as an indulgence. Given the stresses of life and counteracting benefits of play, that notion must change — among all demographics.

"Combat the notion that self-care is selfish," Andrews urged. "Self-care is not indulgent. It is self-preservation."

### Play Powers the Longevity Economy

Debra Whitman, AARP's chief policy officer, summed up the day by pointing out how today's longer lifespans mean that the traditional concept of three life stages—that is, a childhood characterized by play followed by work in adulthood, then play and leisure in retirement—needs to be rendered obsolete. This three-stage life will be replaced by a multistage life during which learning, work, and play are integrated.

The multistage life presents an opportunity and challenge for all sectors of our economy. AARP Thought Leadership and AARP Research have been working on better understanding what we call the longevity economy, a concept that includes measurement of the economic contribution of people ages 50 and older. In 2015, the size of the longevity economy was measured at \$5.6 trillion — and it's growing.

Play is a part of that hefty figure. The leisure and hospitality sector accounts for more than 6 percent of consumer expenditure's impact on GDP. We challenge all economic sectors to create programs that increase opportunities for people of all ages to play — and, as for the previously mentioned disparities, we expect businesses and government to deliver those opportunities to all ZIP codes and for all levels of ability. As the Health Benefits of Travel and Play for Grownups gathering revealed, we understand better than ever that play is a health imperative.

"We need to play as we age to remain healthy and avoid burnout," said Whitman, capturing a salient theme of the day. "Carving time out where we take care of ourselves and take care of others is critical. No guilt. Starting now, play is an integral part of life at all ages."

Finally, Whitman succinctly underscored the science-based foundation of the day's message. "The evidence is in," she said. "Play and travel will inspire health benefits for grownups." ♦

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1. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," General Assembly Resolution 44/25, November 20, 1989.
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3. Dan Buettner, "Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way," National Geographic Washington DC, 2010.
4. Epel, E. S., Puterman, E., Lin, J., Blackburn, E. H., Lum, P. Y., Beckmann, N. D., Zhu, J., Lee, E., Gilbert, A., Rissman, R. A., Tanzi, R. E., ... Schadt, E. E. Meditation and vacation effects have an impact on disease-associated molecular phenotypes, *Translational psychiatry* 6, no. 8 (2016) e880. doi:10.1038/tp.2016.164
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