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AT HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

The credit crunch and the soaring cost of living are leading to a boom in so-called 'staycations' where families stay at home for their main annual holiday. BILL COLES sets out the golden rules for having a great time

WHERE did you go on your holidays? It's a question we've all been asked. In the past it was considered a little embarrassing to reply: "Nowhere".

But now going nowhere is all the rage. Record numbers of us are using home as our base during our two-week main summer vacation.

Quite apart from the huge financial savings you'll make, you can delight in not having to pack, not having to join the airport scrum and not having a furious row before you've even left the house.

Add to that the simple pleasures of no travel insurance, no outsized insects and no lousy rates of exchange against the euro and it's a wonder that any of us dream of holidaying away from home.

But for all the delights of the "staycation", there are still a few basic rules to be observed – because without them it could quickly turn into just another humdrum fortnight with the family.

1 Having sensibly opted for a home holiday, you will be saving at least £1,000 and probably much more. You should see this money not as something that might go towards your bottomless pit of a mortgage but rather as the most wonderful windfall. Earmark a good portion of it as a home holiday budget.

2 Why not give your garden a holiday makeover with a paddling pool, sun-loungers or a hammock. Palm trees (both real and plastic) can be hired by the week, as can tents, water-slides and bouncy castles.

3 It is vital that adults commit to the home holiday. Just as army officers should never be seen to quarrel in front of the troops, so parents must demonstrate an entirely positive, upbeat attitude. Children must be told their "staycation" is the holiday of a lifetime.

4 The essence of a holiday is not so much the change of location as the break from the usual routine. Try to snap out of what you might normally do over a weekend. Breakfasts can be eaten outside with deli treats that might normally be out of your price range. All washing and ironing should, as far as is possible, be put on hold. Bath the kids in the morning rather than at night.

5 Put an axe through the TV. Well, not literally. But it's important that the children understand that the TV has died a death. It's in kids' very nature to plump for the Lowest Common Denominator option and if the telly is available, then they'll watch it.

6 It's going to be a wrench but switch off your mobile phone, the computer and preferably your home phone, too. Holidays are about reconnecting with the family and having that fabled "quality time". Yet in our day-to-day lives there are so many petty intrusions. How often do you ignore the family while you take yet another "urgent" phone call? How often do you check your e-mails, only to find that you've frittered away another hour? The joy of being abroad is not

being encumbered with all these gizmos. Strive to release yourself from this in your own home.

7 There will be numerous chores to do about the house and probably a mountain of paperwork, too. Don't do it. That's what bank holidays are for. If you absolutely insist, set aside just the first day of your staycation for chores – but for the rest of the time, relax. You're on holiday.

8 Just as you would if you were holidaying abroad, treat yourself to some new clothes. What you wear entirely alters your perception of what lies ahead for the day.

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When you put on your work-clothes you slip back into the work mindset. For your home holiday, wear clothes that put you in the holiday mood – shorts, Hawaiian shirts, flip-flops.

9 Two days before the start, you may want to begin packing. Somehow it doesn't feel right to be "going on holiday" and yet not to be getting the bags ready. But it's still possible to "pack" for your holiday – by disposing of all those old clothes that haven't been worn in years. De-cluttering will give you a lift and giving the clothes to charity will do wonders for your karma.

10 Accept that on some days it's going to rain. Prepare early for the foul weather – and embrace it when it arrives. Cinema slots should already have been lined up and swimming pools should be on stand-by.

11 Set out to have fun. For instance, if you plan to visit a local castle or historic home, get the entire family to pretend to be foreign – and dress accordingly. Although it is quite amusing to speak with an American or Australian accent, for true hilarity speak English with a hint of guttural German.

12 Do not make the mistake of believing that your children know what's good for them. Of course they don't. If they were left to their own devices, they'd be perfect monsters who did nothing all day but watch TV and eat burgers. So if you have a project for the day, such as a slightly off-beat trip, the kids must never be allowed into the decision-making process. They must be informed of the executive decision. More often than not, they'll enjoy themselves far more than they would have expected to.

13 On holiday, 50 per cent of women most look forward to having a good read. If you love your holiday books, treat yourself to a £50 splurge at your local bookshop. Even better, go online to the second-hand book site www.abebooks.com and buy all those books you've always wanted to own but have never managed to track down.

14 For one in three men, a re-kindling of their love-life is the number one holiday priority. There's no reason why that can't happen at home. The telly's off, the wine is flowing (as you've splashed out on some decent stuff rather than the usual plonk), and before you know it you're chatting together in the candlelight. The magic is back.

15 It's hard to beat that first evening drink after you've come in from the beach and showered off the sand. Create your own cocktail hour at 6.30pm. Why not hire a barman one evening? And dress to impress; partners might not say as much but they always appreciate the effort.

16 Try travelling by train. Spending too long in the car smacks of grizzly Sunday afternoon outings. A train-trip is an adventure in its own right. A little forward planning can secure cheap fares, too.

17 Holidays are largely about larking about with the kids. But adults should also earmark time for themselves. The huge advantage of being at home is that you've got the normal baby-sitters on tap. No one was ever meant to spend every waking hour of their holiday with their kids.

18 Be aware that teenagers are a different species. It requires canniness to get a teenager to do anything at all. Most of the time they'd prefer to be with their mates rather than their parents; don't fight it. But they do respond well to the prospect of a restaurant outing.

19 Have board games ready for the day when it's pouring and you can't be bothered to leave the house. Introduce your children to the unexpected thrills of Monopoly and Risk – a very different pleasure from blasting people to death in Grand Theft Auto IV.

20 Put up a tent in the garden and let the kids sleep out if they're old enough. It may be the highlight of their holiday. Leave snacks for a midnight feast. Buy cheap torches from the supermarket. But leave the back door unlocked for when it starts raining.

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