



Easy Escapes

AN OLD CAMPER TRAILER ON A CAMPSITE, AMONG THE TREES: A PLACE TO SWITCH INTO VACATION MODE AS SOON AS YOU TAKE IN THE FOREST AIR. JOURNALIST CAROLINE BUIJS WRITES ABOUT WASHING DISHES OUTDOORS, LIFE WITHOUT A PHONE AND HOURS SPENT LAZING IN A HAMMOCK.

It always takes me by surprise, the peacefulness that I feel as soon as I walk down the little path where our camper trailer stands on a campsite in the forest. It's a dirt path with some grass here and there, bordered by oak trees and hawthorn bushes. Now and then, you can see another camper trailer through the greenery. They are all old and a bit worn around the edges—they were made in the 1960s and 1970s—but they are still beauties. The first thing I always do when I arrive, after opening the camper trailer's windows wide and taking a few deep breaths of forest air, is to fill the kettle for a cup of tea. I walk to the water tap a little way down the path, accompanied by the chirping of birds. On my way, I notice how the leaves of the oak and hawthorn have managed to become just that little bit greener since the last time I was there. Or, in the fall, just that little bit yellower.

Actually, it's not strange at all that I feel so peaceful here. According to American philosopher and psychologist William James, there is nowhere better to relax your focus than in nature; you simply let yourself be carried away by whatever appears before you. For me, that usually means I lie in my hammock under the trees and watch the little robin hiding behind the wheels of the camper trailer, and sometimes carefully hopping out. When there's a sea breeze, I listen to the rustling of

the tree leaves and watch the swaying treetops. A weekend in and around the camper trailer always gives me a moment of peace from my busy week, where my brain and mind can relax. I sleep better here, worry less and live without a schedule. In the mornings, I practically never know what I'll be doing that day. Will it be going for a bike ride, walking to the sea, or just lying in the hammock with a good book?

HOUSE ON WHEELS

That this place is so perfect for relaxing and gives me such a good vacation feeling after a mere fifteen minutes wasn't the reason we bought the camper trailer twelve years ago. With two young children and an apartment without a garden in the middle of a city, we were always looking for a place to be outside in good weather: the kids' pool in the park, the grandparents' garden, the playground just around the corner. Perfectly nice places, but always a drag and a hassle to pack bags, snacks and drinks, and lug it all up and down four flights of stairs.

I secretly dreamed of a vacation home, somewhere in the countryside, where we could go for the whole weekend. But every house I liked was far too expensive. Until I saw a mother from school throw her weekend bag into the car on a Friday afternoon. "Are you going on >



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vacation?" I asked. "Something like that," she replied. "I'm off to my camper trailer by the sea." A house on wheels! That *did* turn out to be affordable. I looked around on websites one evening and found a beautiful 1969 Tabbert for €750.

After my husband and I found a spot on a campsite by the sea, a friend asked whether I minded having to leave my house to go to the camper trailer. But 'having to leave' turned out to be an advantage and to contribute to that vacation feeling: by being away from home—for a weekend or even for a day—there's no room for worry. There's no paperwork that needs sorting, no basket of laundry begging to be folded, no bathroom that needs scrubbing. Here I can really get away from it all, just like on a vacation.

And the camper trailer is always ready: When the weather's good, I live the outdoor life here every weekend, without having to first search for a hotel, Airbnb or campsite. I can even decide to go at the last minute: There are always enough clothes here and I can get some groceries from the farmer across the street.

And I know what I'll find here; it's always the same. In fact, I've known what I'll find for twelve years. That again makes it easier to do nothing at all here, because the beach and forest are already familiar. I can go there if I feel like it, but there's no need for sightseeing, and this gives me the peace of mind I need to lie in the hammock under the trees for entire afternoons.

CLOUD WATCHING

Just like at home, we've developed our own rituals here. Early in the morning, when it's still too cold outside, we listen to a bird concert from our beds with

the window open. We eat ice creams on the beach, take the annual 'who dares to dive in first' plunge into the sea and, during longer public holiday weekends, friends and family join us, setting up tents next to our camper trailer. Just like at home, we have neighbors here you can chat with, but who you don't have to visit all the time. And just like at home, I have a favorite second-hand store nearby. I actually live a kind of parallel life here, but—compared to the city—it's a bit greener and, most important, a bit slower.

Everything takes more time and is less efficient here. There is no electricity and I cook (read: get by) on a portable gas stove. Here I decide what to eat on the day itself, because there's no refrigerator and the cooler holds exactly one day's worth of food. I wash the dishes by hand, outside under the trees. I don't look at my phone, because there is no Wi-Fi and my 4G rarely works. And when something goes wrong with my bike, it's not really a problem: The beach itself is no longer the end goal so much as the walk there and back. Along the way, we regularly lie back on the side of the path, watching the clouds, or I pick wild flowers to dry at home.

I recently realized that a weekend in the camper trailer is similar to what is called *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) in Japan, which refers to the beneficial effects of nature. Japanese researcher Yoshifumi Miyazaki describes it very well in his book *Shinrin-yoku: The Japanese Way of Forest Bathing for Health and Relaxation*. He writes that most people experience well-being in nature and that is precisely why our stress levels are reduced. In his view, he writes, well-being is a state in which the rhythms of humans and nature are synchronized. Miyazaki shares that he already feels

such synchronization when looking at a potted plant. There must be a connection with the seven million-year-old evolution of us humans, he writes, when for the largest part nature was our habitat and our body was adapted to it.

HIBERNATION

My children are now teenagers. They find the camper trailer boring (no Wi-Fi) and they're not interested in nature (I hope that this will change as they get older). We wanted to close up our place about two years ago for that reason, but I'm so glad we didn't, because now the city is getting even busier, and I don't always manage to kick back and do nothing at home. The place is becoming even more valuable for these reasons. Nowadays, my husband and I sometimes spend the weekend there together and leave the children at home alone—which is good practice for them at being independent.

More and more often, I also go there on my own during a weekday—sometimes to be able to work quietly, without Wi-Fi, but often just to be there. It's a funny situation every time I get home: My phone's battery is almost always empty due to the lack of power source in the camper trailer, but I'm totally recharged.

Every summer, the Tabbert has to leave its spot for seven weeks, when the campsite rents out the space to campers. That's okay, because in the summer I prefer to go on vacation for as long as possible and preferably somewhere I've never been to before. When I clean the camper trailer at the end of October and prepare it for its hibernation, all those leaves that we saw growing steadily greener on the oak trees in March have fallen

on the forest floor. Even though that makes me feel slightly melancholic, it also feels right: It's time to live indoors again for a few months, stretched out on the couch with a wool blanket instead of in the hammock. ●

CITY AND COUNTRY

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During the Industrial Revolution, vast numbers of humans moved to urban surroundings, which means that humans have spent over 99.99 percent of their time in a natural environment. In 1800, three percent of the world's population lived in urban areas. By 1900 this was close to 14 percent and in 2016 it reached 54 percent. The United Nations Population Division predicts that this will rise to 66 percent by 2050. But genes cannot change over a few hundred years, which means that we live in a modern society in bodies that are still geared towards natural environments. According to Japanese researcher and writer Yoshifumi Miyazaki, this inevitably causes stress. But there is hope: When we come into contact with nature (a forest, park or flower bed in the garden), we feel relaxed. That is because our body (right down to our genes) is tuned into it.
Source: 'Shinrin-yoku: The Japanese Way of Forest Bathing for Health and Relaxation', by Yoshifumi Miyazaki
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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY CAROLINE BUIJS HAND-LETTERING VALESKA VAN WAVEREN