Planning the Perfect Vacation
By Michelle Higgins
July 20, 2011

WITH summer in full swing, the top priority of most travelers is simple: relax. But for many people that isn’t such an easy goal to attain.

Readers’ Comments

The problem is how to get the most out of those precious days off. Is it best to fill them with a lot of activities? Or is there a benefit to just doing nothing? Do you need at least a week, if not more, to decompress? Or will short getaways do the trick? And what about the e-mail accruing every second you are out of the office? Is it less stressful to answer those messages while on vacation? Or should you completely disconnect and deal with them when you return?

The answers depend on an individual’s personality. Yet a review of behavioral studies and interviews with experts revealed that there are several factors that should not be ignored.

Below, the Practical Traveler’s as-scientific-as-possible guide to planning the perfect vacation:

RELISH THE ANTICIPATION Planning early brings many people more joy than the actual vacation. A 2010 study by Jeroen Nawijn, a tourism research lecturer at Breda University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, examined the behavior of 1,530 Dutch adults and found that the 974 individuals who took a vacation achieved the greatest amount of happiness leading up to the trip.

His findings were in line with studies led by the psychologists Leigh Thompson of Northwestern University and Terence Mitchell of the University of Washington that examined travelers’ anticipation of, actual experiences on, and memories of vacations. The results, published in 1997 in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, found that regardless of the type of trip, vacationers were happier in the period leading up to their time off than during the vacation itself.

So booking your trip well ahead not only gives you an edge when it comes to logistics (getting the best room and often the best deal), it also helps build anticipation, which can boost happiness. Not to mention that planning early can decrease the stress of a last-minute scramble.

LONGER ISN’T NECESSARILY BETTER If a leisurely one- or two-week vacation is not possible, you might try taking multiple short trips. In fact, taking several three- or four-day trips — providing multiple opportunities to experience the pleasure of anticipation — may even be more beneficial than one long vacation.

“I found that the length of stay has very little influence on how people feel during a trip or afterwards,” Professor Nawijn said.

In other words, if you take only one big vacation a year, then it’s over and there’s nothing to look forward to until next year. That does not mean every vacation should be a quick weekend jaunt.
There should be a balance between travel time (and the inevitable hassles that come with it) and vacation days at your destination, Professor Nawijn said.

WHATEVER YOU DO, MAKE YOUR TIME COUNT While the length of your vacation may vary, some experts believe true relaxation can’t be rushed.

“It takes one week to get into it and really start to unwind,” said Al Gini, a business ethics professor at Loyola University of Chicago and the author of “The Importance of Being Lazy.” “People very often take three days of vacation and work right up until the end,” he added. “Those first three days you’re exhausted and confused and still tied in knots.”

His advice: Give yourself permission to slow down leading up to your trip by taking a few days for packing and for wrapping things up at work. Building in time to wind down at the end of your trip by lounging by the pool instead of running around sightseeing also helps avoid coming home exhausted.

DITCH THE SMARTPHONE There are no definitive studies on how to best manage the inevitable e-mail pileup back at the office. The answer, experts say, depends on you.

“There are some people who just by not connecting at all for a week or two weeks or even three days will actually become more stressed out thinking about all the things they’re missing and could be going wrong and so forth,” said Dalton Conley, New York University’s dean of social sciences, who uses the term “weisure” to describe the increasingly blurring boundaries between work and leisure time in his 2009 book, “Elsewhere, U.S.A.”

“Other people will need to be constantly connected to feel secure,” he added. (Mr. Conley seems to fall into the latter category: he returned this reporter’s call while on vacation himself.)

For those who simply can’t disconnect, check e-mail only at a certain time and stick to it. For those who really want to get away from it all, but don’t trust their ability to ignore their smartphone, travel to places where connectivity is not an option.

“One of the most relaxing vacations I ever had was to a remote island in Fiji,” said Jeremy McCarthy, corporate spa director for Starwood Hotels and Resorts, who has a master’s degree in applied positive psychology and maintains a blog on the psychology of well-being. “Although I initially freaked out when I realized I would not be able to get online, once I accepted that it was beyond my control it allowed me to truly escape.”

PROTECT YOURSELF WITH A CAREFULLY WRITTEN OUT-OF-OFFICE MESSAGE To lessen the number of e-mails awaiting your return, Mr. McCarthy recommends the following vacation message: “I will be out of the office with no access to e-mail until Aug. 17. If you need my assistance or attention after I return, please resend your message after that date.”

“If the sender really needs help,” he said, “they’ll resend the e-mail.”

You might also consider doing what a couple of my colleagues have suggested: adding a day or two to your return date to give yourself time to catch up before new e-mails start pouring in.
LOSE YOURSELF IN AN ACTIVITY “Doing activities that completely absorb us can be good while on vacation,” said Elizabeth W. Dunn, an associate professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia who studies consumption and happiness. She said that research by Christopher Hsee, a professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, found that people who use their time productively are happier than people who are idle.

That doesn’t mean you have to take an intensive yoga or rock-climbing course. Indeed, Professor Hsee points out that staying busy doesn’t have to be physical: simply exploring the local culture can be beneficial, he said. Consider taking a cooking class while in Italy instead of simply eating out, or sign up for an in-depth tour of an archaeological site while in Mexico instead of lying by the pool.

END ON A HIGH NOTE Daniel Kahneman, a Princeton psychologist and Nobel laureate, has demonstrated in studies that people tend to judge experiences largely on peak moments, either good or bad, that stood out — regardless of how long the experience lasted (a phenomenon called the “peak-end rule”).

While it is not always possible to end a trip with a positive experience (especially if flights are involved), planning at least one special activity (an epic meal, a scenic hike) can make a difference. After all, it’s the highlights we tend to brag about to our friends when we return.