

# The joy of being alone at HOME... & AWAY

We love and cherish them, but what's the effect of a weekend without our families? Sheer bliss, say our two writers



**Author Christina Hopkinson is married and lives in London with her husband and three children.**

I never planned to spend the weekend without my husband or children. Oh no, that would be selfish. But somehow, fate recently conspired to banish my husband and our two youngest off to my mother-in-law's in the country, and my son to a sporting fixture, followed by a sleepover. Suddenly, I was looking at a whole 30 hours in the family home. Without the family.

At first, I felt panic. I was like a ventriloquist being forced on stage without his dummy – my weekends revolve around them so much that I feared loneliness. I worried that I'd find myself sitting on their beds, clutching teddies and weeping like an empty nester on a bad TV drama.

This fear lasted all of three minutes, to be replaced by a feeling that, if it had been given voice, would have been the squealing “wah-hey” of an American college girl going on her first spring break.

We moved into our house when I was heavily pregnant with my eldest, almost

**TIME ALONE AT HOME**  
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a decade ago. For two brief months, it was just my husband and I. “This will be an adult-only space,” we vowed, looking at the living room. “We won't be the sort of parents who let their house get silted over with plastic tat and children's clutter.”

Ha! Fast forward nine years and three births later, and every room oozes toys and primary colours. The kitchen has

become a restaurant, which serves over 70 covers a week to a demanding trio of customers. Our bed is a place where sick children sleep and adults are woken at dawn.

As soon as I dropped off my son at his football match on Saturday morning, I took myself off for a run and then a leisurely latte and read of the papers. Three whole papers, in fact. Then, and I'm almost ashamed to admit this, I tidied out a cupboard. Tragic, I know, but the feeling of

satisfaction that I got from seeing its ordered space was one that I used to get from buying impractical dresses.

Scrubbing the insides of a toy cupboard successfully expunged any remaining guilt and I skipped off in my heels to meet my single friend Katie in a fashionable hotel. Is there any more pointless and self-indulgent meal than afternoon tea, complete with Champagne and a dainty cake stand? I didn't have to tell anyone that they had to eat a cucumber sandwich before scoffing the scones, nor take the food rejected by others and avoid alcohol. Katie regaled me with tales of parties, where the only clowns were the men trying to hit on her and the party bags were Birkins.

Back home, I cleared the bath of squeeze toys and used the rose oil that had been gathering dust. I realised that in the six years since we had our bathroom redecorated, I'd never once taken a bath. >>



Champagne, frothy baths, high heels... what other clichés of womanhood could I explore? Oh yes, chocolate, of course, which I ate while watching all those backed-up episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* (usually overruled by *Barbie: Princess Charm School*).

I went to bed, happy in the knowledge that I could wake up when I wanted the next day. Which, inevitably, turned out to be 6.30am. Still, it's one thing to wake at dawn, another to get up, which I emphatically did not for another three hours. Another friend was lined up for Sunday brunch.

By the time my family returned to me, I was desperate to see them, no matter lovely my time had been. I didn't miss the mess and the questions, and the endless prodding and pawing, but I'd missed their noise and laughter.

They ran in, full of kisses and hugs, and for a few minutes, I thought I'd burst with happiness. "Did you miss us, Mummy?" they cried. "Of course," I said, "but I was very busy decluttering," I added for my husband's benefit.

## A girls' only weekend away



**Luisa Dillner is a GP and lives in London. She is married with five children.**

We set off in Janice's sports car. That alone would be enough for me. I'd be happy if we drove around for an hour and then came home. My car is a people carrier with dents in the sides, hot chocolate spilt over the seats and crisp wrappers carpeting the floor. Once, when I opened the door in the supermarket car park, a woman rushed over to thank me for having a car more disgusting than hers. But thankfully, we aren't just going for a drive – we are off on our annual two days away. A girls' only weekend trip to a hotel with a spa (how magical can a short word be?). We actually go from Sunday to Tuesday because we feel less guilty spending half the weekend with our

families before bunking off. When we get to our hotel, in the middle of the Somerset countryside, it is, ironically for us, full of noisy families having Sunday lunch. But soon they go and we feel smug, knowing that they'll be getting ready for the week ahead. We have an evening of swimming in the outdoor pool, which is so warm that steam rises from it, drinking vodka and tonic in the trendy hotel bar and having a leisurely supper that someone has cooked for us. Tonight, we won't yell at anyone to get to bed – hell, we won't even be washing up.

I can't remember when we first decided to go away together. Sometimes, it is three of us, occasionally four. We met 20 years ago through ex-boyfriends or friends of friends. So we have known each other

through dodgy partners, before children (we now have 11 between us), during career dilemmas and after settling down. As well as sharing memories, we've shown each other the ugly sides of ourselves, the insecurities and jealousies. We have different jobs, sizes of house, body mass indexes and, at any one time, some of us will be happier than others, but we're not competitive. We are for each other, like musketeers, only on a spa break. We wonder, aloud, if we have a better time together here than if we came to the same hotel with our partners instead. Then we feel a bit disloyal.

The night before our trip, I make a list so that my husband knows the full horror of what he's expected to do. Do the children really have all those activities? No wonder I'm so exhausted. Then he needs to know that our youngest will only have a

bath if she has Ariel the mermaid in it and no, don't wash her hair as she will go ballistic and I won't be there to comfort her.

As I make the list, I realise why I need a break. I am drowning in dependency – much of it my own making, but I'll appreciate my family much more if I can escape from them for two nights a year.

In our hotel, we all share one room. In fact, two of us share the enormous bed, while the others have the bunk bed – of course, it's a family room. To economise we bring our own Champagne to drink before supper. Both evenings have the same routine – we chat, swim, drink, eat, and drink and chat some more. Sometimes we laugh so much our sides really do ache.

I resist the temptation to phone home more than twice a day – the first night I forget until it's so late that only my husband is up. "We're all fine," he says firmly. "Don't ring all the time."

"What's all the time?" I ask.

Sometimes I think I suffer more from separation anxiety than my children, but there are whole swathes of these two days that I forget I have a family. There's an incredible freedom from not having to be somewhere.

On the last day, we have an early lunch, then race home. But before we do, we book the same room for next year. **w&h**

### MY YEARLY BREAK

*"I appreciate my family more if I can escape for two nights a year"*

