

Have Mum, Will Travel

A thrill-seeking getaway with your mother? Maybe it's not high on this year's agenda. But sometimes the tropical sun can put your mum in a whole new light.

By Marcia Kaye

Sandy started it. She came back to the mid-winter aquafit class after a week's absence, refreshed and golden. "Nassau," she said. "With the whole family?" I asked enviously. "Nope, just me and my mother. It was great." A duty holiday with her 79-year-old widowed mother was great?

What a good daughter. Unlike me. A few months back I'd briefly considered taking my own 84-year-old mother on a holiday, then dismissed the idea as too difficult, too risky and too much precious holiday time away from my family. Yet here was a happy survivor of a mother-daughter trip. I began to reconsider. Could I do it, too?

It's not as if Mum wasn't up to the challenge. At 60, she hitchhiked around Israel, changing her money on the black market. At 65, she braved filthy squatter toilets in rural Sri Lanka. I know these things because my husband, Alan, and I were with her. One time, after the three of us rode an all-night bus through bandit territory into the opium-growing hills of northern Thailand, I pointed out that the front of the bus was riddled with bullet holes. She said, "I noticed earlier, dear, but I didn't want to worry you."

While those trips with Mum were all wildly successful, they were never just Mum and me. Easygoing Alan was always there as a buffer between my occasionally critical mother and my frequently cranky self. If Mum said to me, "Are you really going to dinner in that?" (gesturing to my tie-dyed T-shirt and batik sarong), Alan would chuckle and give me a look that said "Relax" before any vestige of my adolescent rebellion could surface. But this time, it would be just the two of us. Alone.

I began to weigh the logistics. On one hand, it would be great to bring Alan along as a neutral Switzerland between Mum and me. On the other hand, a single woman like Mum, a widow for 26 years, can feel like a fifth wheel around couples.

Then again, I hadn't spent a week alone with Mum since I left home at 17. When we'd travelled together, she had always had her own room. I didn't know if she snored, thrashed around or got up in the night. She didn't know that I sometimes do all three.

But if I didn't take a trip with her, who would? When you're 84, most of your friends are dead, in nursing homes or not well enough to travel.

Then again, she's older than the Pope. She has a chronic cough from a long-ago bout of pneumonia. Five years ago she was rushed to emergency with what turned out to be a malignant colon tumour. What if something happened far from a hospital?

But Mum had recovered beautifully from cancer and here was a second chance. On the other hand....

After analyzing the situation to death (and running out of hands), I took a leap of faith and called her up. "Mum, how would you like to go to a Caribbean resort with me for a week?"

There was a pause of, perhaps, a nanosecond. "I'd love it."

"Don't you want to think about it for a—"

"No. When do we go?"

Telling people you're going on holiday with your mother is like telling them you're pregnant: they're excited for you but feel compelled to share their horror stories. Helpful friends told me about elderly mothers who got sunstroke, had screaming nightmares and got robbed in crowded marketplaces. Everyone made sure I saw the front-page story about a Canadian family who came down with salmonella at a four-star Caribbean resort. Sandy, my original inspiration for this trip, advised, "Pack the whole medicine cabinet, take a pile of books, spend some time apart. And do a lot of this." She bent her elbow and made drinking motions with her hand. Was it too late to buy trip cancellation insurance?

On D-Day – Departure Day – Mum and I got to the airport three hours early for our afternoon flight to Cuba, because Mum doesn't like to be late. I pulled my feather-light wheelee bag. My mother dragged her ancient, beloved solid-sided suitcase, which would have neared the airline's weight limit even when empty and which she insisted on hauling herself. I was holding the tickets, passports, tourist cards and a bellyful of anxiety. When the ground attendant asked what baggage I was carrying, I almost said, "Oh, God, where do I begin?"

It was dark and raining when the bus pulled away from Cuba's Holguin airport to take us to our resort. After a long ride we pulled up to a luxurious, flower-filled, open-air lobby bursting with laughter and music. "Yes!" I thought excitedly. And Mum had been skeptical when I booked this trip on the Internet. But this was not our resort. Ours was the next stop – a drab building with a near-deserted lobby and a tired night clerk. All the restaurants were closed. It was too dark to see the view, so we went to our room, which was painted such an intense blue I felt as though I needed scuba gear just to breathe. I lay awake in the dark, overwhelmed with the fear that this trip, which Mum had been so excited about, was already a disappointment.

The next morning we both woke up at the same time – at least our body clocks were in sync – and together, we tentatively peeked through the curtains to the balcony. We stepped into a stunning view of tropical gardens, a free-form pool sparkling in the sun and the ocean glinting beyond. Heartened, we dressed quickly and headed down to the breakfast buffet, where I steered Mum away from the platters heaped with fresh mango, papaya and pineapple. "No fruit!" I said firmly, remembering my friends' salmonella warnings. "No fresh juices. No meat. No ice." Mum who used to eat from street vendors, muttered "No breakfast" as we both helped ourselves to cereal and yogurt.

As we made our way to the outdoor patio, several couples at neighbouring tables glanced over at us. "Hey, I'm not travelling with my mother because I had no one else to go with," I wanted to tell them. "I could just as easily be here with my husband." As if hearing my thoughts, Mum, who's not prone to mushy sentiment, said, "Marcia, you could have taken anybody on this trip – Alan, the girls, a friend – but you chose me. I just want to tell you how

happy that made me.” I could only mumble something and stare into my coffee, guilty with the knowledge that I didn’t deserve such gratitude.

When we went up to the room to change into bathing suits, I offered to apply sunscreen to her shoulders and back. At five foot three and 104 pounds, Mum looks tiny and frail but her back has always been straight and strong, having carried her through the Depression, a world war, raising four headstrong daughters and the loss of a husband when she was 59. As I rubbed the lotion into her mottled skin, she closed her eyes and murmured, “Ooh, that feels wonderful.” I realized that it must have been years since she’d felt the caress of a hand on her bare skin. She put on a pair of large, old green sunglasses that had been my dad’s and we strolled down to the ocean.

I’d brought two pairs of beach shoes for the rocks, but Mum liked the feel of sand and water on her bare toes. As we waded in, even the small waves threatened to knock her off balance. I held her hand, just as she used to hold mine long ago on vacations in Florida. Suddenly she banged her toe and it swelled up large and purple. Damn it, why couldn’t I take care of her?

But I’d forgotten that Mum had long been taking care of herself. She ignored her swollen toe and had a long swim, then went to the aquafit class in the pool. That afternoon she came with me to the Spanish lesson. Mum, who’s always loved languages, was in her element, overcoming her shyness to toss off phrases such “*Me llamo Elinor*” and “*Vivo en Canada.*” The moment she revealed her age – “*Tengo ochenta y cuatro años*” – her fellow classmates, from Germany, Italy and France, looked at her with new respect bordering on reverence.

I began to look at her with new eyes, too. In the dance lesson I felt a surge of pride as I watched Mum attempt the steps. I wanted to brag about her the way I had with my children: “Look, she’s four and she’s learning to read!” Now I wanted to say, “Look, she’s 84 and she’s doing the mambo!”

As we relaxed by the pool and ordered drinks, I said, “Do you want to have a nap before dinner?” She looked startled and said, “No. Do you? Aren’t you feeling well, dear?” My own ageist attitudes were slapping me in the face. We laughed as the waiter set down our drinks and I told him, “No, the mango juice is for me. The gin and tonic is for my mother.”

That night we had three invitations for dinner. “They love you here,” I said. Mum responded, “Oh, no. They’re just amazed that anyone this old isn’t completely dotty.”

By Day 2, Mum was the star of the resort. Cecilia, the Spanish teacher, greeted her with, “Good morning, my lady Elinor. You’re looking beautiful this morning.” People smiled and stopped to say hello. A woman about my age from Montreal took me aside and said, “It’s so lovely that you’re here with your mother. I wish I’d done that, but my mother died last year.”

At the buffet table, Mum headed for the fresh fruit before I could stop her. Brushing aside my warnings, she said, “I trust this place,” and from then on would help herself to whatever she wanted, with no ill effects.

We fell into a pleasant routine of beach in the morning, pool in the afternoon, outdoor entertainment till midnight. Mum got loads of attention, but not all of it. By mid-week the young guy working in the beach hut, who knew I was with my mother, eyed me suggestively and said, “You and me – tonight – at the disco.” Flattered, I turned him down, but not before thinking this kind of thing never happens to me when I vacation with my husband and kids.

Mum spent many hours talking about my sisters and me when we were little, about our dad, about the old days. Some stories I'd heard a hundred times, such as how my parents met when my father, a classical singer, learned his accompanist was sick. My mother, a concert pianist, was called as a last-minute replacement. Other stories were new to me, such as when my dad, home from the war, had to relearn how to drive and zigzagged the Ford roadster all over the street. How great that she has all these stories, I thought. How great that for once I can listen without being distracted by phones or deadlines or children's demands.

By week's end we decided to do the dolphin excursion. On the speedboat to a sectioned-off area of the ocean, my heart was pounding with excitement and fear. Would swimming with dolphins be safe? Would we have to go underwater? Mum doesn't even like to get her hair wet.

Strapped into her life jacket, Mum slipped into the water and immediately started petting a large dolphin. "Not on the genitals!" the trainer yelled, as Mum, embarrassed, whipped her hand away.

Then the trainer signalled the start of The Kissing Game. The dolphin was to swim straight at each of us, then stop and give us a kiss on the cheek. A boisterous young man on his honeymoon was up first. The dolphin plowed into him so fast that he disappeared underwater for a few seconds. He came up sputtering and holding his cheek, saying, "Whoa, that hurts. Your mother's not going to do this, is she?"

It was too late. It was Mum's turn next and the same dolphin was already coming at her like a torpedo. I could only watch in horrified fascination, thinking, "The dolphin's going to kill her." But instead of ramming her, the creature stopped short a few inches in front of her, then ever-so-slowly sidled up and softly nuzzled her cheek. She put her arms around it and murmured words that only the dolphin could hear.

Back at the resort, Mum didn't want other people to join us for our last dinner. We ate alone, lingering over glasses of wine and toasting our most excellent vacation. "Would you do this again?" I asked her. "In a minute," she answered.

Me too, Mum.
