

'Tis the season to vacation

by Sabine Eiche

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It's summer time, which means vacation time, which means that most people are on the move. That's nothing new. Already thousands of years ago people were on the move during the summer. In fact, the ancients practically invented vacations. However, back then there were far fewer people who could afford such a luxury. Time off for leisure was a privilege of the upper class.

In ancient Rome, the rich fled the stench and heat of the city and headed for their villas along the Tyrrhenian Sea and in the countryside on an annual migration called the "peregrinatio," which is Latin for travelling abroad. It could begin as early as May and last until October. The pastimes in which the ancients indulged while on their "peregrinatio" were not too different from ours when we're holidaying – they visited friends, ate lots, went sightseeing and bought souvenirs. They even went swimming – in bathing suits made of goatskin.

By medieval times, the "peregrinatio" was called the "villeggiatura," an Italian word meaning to live in the country, and it could last anywhere from two to four months. Also the pope and his cardinals would withdraw from Rome during the hot months. In Latin (the language of the church), the period when the papal court was absent was called the "vacationes generales," which hints at the original meaning of our word vacation – a time when normal business is suspended. Besides the church, also law courts, universities and schools had vacations, more or less as is the custom today.

We use the words vacation and holiday interchangeably, but holiday started out meaning a consecrated day, a religious feast day. By the 16th century,

while still referring to a holy day, holiday had come to be regarded not so much a day for worship as a day free from work.

Nowadays, travel can be an integral part of a vacation, for example on a cruise or a tour. Until a couple of centuries ago, travel was primarily for the purpose of getting from one place to another. The word travel has a curious history, for it was originally the same word as travail, which comes from the medieval Latin “trepalium,” an instrument of torture. It isn’t often that words reconnect with their original meanings, but travel seems to have managed it, for there are few people today who would disagree that travel (especially air travel) is once again a travail – a bodily or mental labour of a painful nature.

Travel by water was often called a voyage, from the Latin “viaticum,” meaning money or provisions for a journey. The Latin “diurnum,” signifying daily portion, is the root for the word journey, which originally referred to a day’s travel. Trip, related to the Old English “treppan” (tread, trample), was used by sailors to refer to a short voyage or journey. By the 17th century it was extended to journeys on land.

No holiday or trips for me this summer. I’m staying put. For excitement, I’ll swat flies and mosquitoes and battle the ants teeming all over the yard. However, I really wouldn’t mind if they decided to pack up and go on vacation – even for four months.