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College Antidote

Explaining the spring-break phenomenon.

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By [Sam Jacoby](#)

The planes leave with their cargoes pale and pallid, and a week later, touch back down with interiors aglow; brown and red and sun-baked, the spring-breakers return. It's a rite of passage wrapped up in pop culture; it's wet t-shirts and mass-promotion; it's crossing a border and magically being over the drinking age. Spring break is an antidote for college — a release from a winter spent bent over laptops and problem sets, a vent for a semester of stress and overwork. Fair enough, but when did this week-long vacation start becoming such a need? When did school get so difficult that jetting off for postcard beaches and foreign beers become required?

Brad Nelson of ICPT.com, a student booking agency, notes that the modern spring break did not even exist until the early '50s, the invention of an ambitious swim coach at the University of Michigan: "He wanted to train early so he took the team down to Florida. Next year, a few girlfriends came down with them. That was about '53 or '54, and it just got bigger and bigger from there." With the 1960 release of "Where the Boys Are," a genre-birthing beach romp about a gaggle of college girls heading down to Florida, "...spring-break population quadrupled," according to Nelson. Soon, tens of thousands of college students were swarming south, soaking up sun and stripping off tank tops along the way. Now, so ordained by the cultural arbiters at MTV and Girls Gone Wild, spring break is no longer optional. It is a part of the rite of college, an essential part of the experience. How well you do spring break is how well you do college.

So spring plans are valuable commodities, traded across dining hall tables, masquerading innocuously as standard small talk. "What are you doing for break?" The question hangs in the air for a moment. You know it's loaded; don't screw this up. "Well, I think I'm sticking around here." Eyes glaze, sweet-and-sour tofu is anxiously scooted across plates; you blew it. Either you like it here so much that you can't bear to leave, or for some reason, five days in Panama City just don't seem appealing. Either answer reveals a different and fundamental personal flaw. The first suggests that you earnestly enjoy the academic elements of college; let's leave that one alone altogether. The second suggests that for some reason, you are not living the kind of life that makes a tropical respite necessary. This poses a question: exactly what kind of life does beget spring break?

It's a life that revolves around Science Center C and Sever 113, one invested in interviews and grants, careers, and bank accounts. The seeds of spring break are planted in the circular drone of endless meetings and the desperate chase for letters of recommendation. It's a life of constant pressure, academic, professional, and social. It's college. Travel psychologist Michael Brein elaborates, "It's a very repressive existence: you're overwhelmed trying to complete your requirements, and you're oppressed because of your familial obligations, jobs, and responsibilities. You're repressed, confined, restricted." It's easy to extend the description to the driven corporate world that awaits most of us, bar the switch in the direction on money flow.

Is this what we do? Grind ourselves down for the privilege of rocking out for a week or two a year? "The same way that spring break is a ritualized chaotic experience, a mega-dose of everything in microcosm," Brein says, "the vacation is another institutionalized dose of the same things." Vacation is a brief flash of another life, an abandonment of all things familiar and a plunge into the new. Erase the pedantry of your routine, of work, tension, and stress, and sop your brain in the soothing morphine of alcohol and the sea breeze.

College is preparation for the real world, and fittingly, spring break is not an exclusively collegiate phenomenon. It's a symptom of the breakneck pace of the modern world. Every spring, hundreds of us are looking forward to jobs working eighty hours a week; in fact, we compete aggressively against each other for the privilege. As the wealth piles up, we can take spring breaks that are that much more fantastic. Hell, two or three if we want. No one works more than the American worker, an average of close to 2000 hours a year, maintaining a significant margin over the stereotypically workaholic Japanese, who take second. It seems fitting then that no one has a more rigorous, more carefully structured, pattern of vacationing, than we do. In fact, the system is so precise, that we start practicing in college.

Perhaps there is nothing better, and alternating productivity and relaxation is the best that can be hoped for. Shouldn't there be a way to dissolve those clear-cut borders? To erase that accepted distinction between work and travel. One way, which no doubt some astute readers are already well aware of, is to spend your college years, and indeed, as many as possible after them, in a drunken haze. Another, and far more difficult, is to find that medium, where going home for spring break can be just as fulfilling as a flesh orgy in Puerto Vallarta, and where sticking around the dorms can be just as reenergizing.

Sam Jacoby '08 (sjacoby@fas) says this only because his last flesh orgy didn't go so well.

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