

Near escape

Virginia executives enjoy these in-state getaways

Norfolk Southern executive Deborah Butler and son Will enjoy visiting the attractions close to Butler's condo in Norfolk.



Photo by Mark Rhodes

by Maya Payne Smart

Even though recession-weary executives may long for a lengthy, sun-kissed vacation in some tropical locale, the reality is that vacations aren't what they used to be. Corporate culture, business demands and new technologies have all conspired to make it hard to disconnect.

Smart phones are almost as common as swimsuits on beaches these days, and

getaways might more aptly be called stay-in-touches as vacationing professionals correspond with the office throughout the day. And that's if you can take off at all.

If there's a bright side to this trend, it's that executives have gained a deeper appreciation for close-to-home escapes. "I absolutely love Virginia," says Deborah Butler, executive vice president for

planning and chief information officer for Norfolk Southern Corp. "I had visited here for business for many years but had no idea until I moved here what a great area it is and how many different things there are to do, starting in my own backyard."

The Atlanta transplant has worked for the company for 31 years but didn't move to its corporate headquarters in



Kingsmill Resort & Spa on the James River in Williamsburg is a favorite destination for executives who want golf, Internet access and children-friendly activities.

Photo courtesy Kingsmill Resort

Norfolk until June 2007. When her teenage son (who lives with his father in Georgia) visits every other weekend, Butler makes sure their Virginia excursions — from Hampton Roads beaches to Luray Caverns — offer fun and an educational component.

She's one of a number of Virginia executives who strike a healthy work/life balance with regular day trips and weekend journeys. From mountain peaks to coastal plains, here are some go-to destinations recommended by leaders who understand that time away from work can be good for business.

Staying connected



West

Marilyn West, chairman and CEO of M.H. West & Co. Inc., a Richmond-based management consulting firm, admires people who can leave their BlackBerry behind when they vacation but admits that it's not her style. "I have more anxiety from not being in touch than I do

being in touch," she says. "It will be 20 years that I've had my business, and I've never been able to totally separate from the business. In my own mind, it relaxes me to know what's going on even if I'm not totally responsive."

Staying connected often means staying close. About three times a month from June to September, West makes her way to the Hampton Roads area's Sunset Yachting Center to get out on her boat, go fishing and catch up on reading for a day or long weekend. On other occasions, she takes interstates 64 and 81 toward Harrisonburg for day trips, stopping at restaurants along the way. "If I leave the office at noon on Friday and don't come back until Monday, I feel like I've been away for three weeks," she says. "We have owned a boat for about 30 years, so that represents a large number of trips, many fish catches and much fun and relaxation."

Rob Eastep, CEO of ESM Golf, a Richmond-based golf club management consulting firm, considers kid-friendly activities, golf and Internet access as vaca-

tion necessities. The last amenity is a legacy of his corporate history but also a function of his "type A" personality, he explains. "I was the CFO for a public company [Saxon Capital Inc.] and in that position you're on 24/7," he says. "As an executive you get paid a healthy salary and for that you give up a little bit of your ability to disconnect from the rest of the world. Fortunately, I've got a wife who understands and respects that."



Eastep

For the Easteps, Williamsburg is the long weekend destination of choice. Their 6- and 9-year-old children enjoy Kingsmill Resort and Spa's par-3 golf course, restaurants and playground as well as nearby Busch Gardens, Water Country USA and Colonial Williamsburg. And Eastep enjoys the spa and 18-hole courses.

"Wireless and connectivity issues might be a deterrent to camping and hiking vacations," he notes. "It's an interesting dichotomy in the information age



of trying to stay connected even though every person, whether they are an executive or not, needs to have that time to turn off your brain and regenerate your batteries.”

Quality vs. quantity

Greg Ray, the vice president of quality and compliance for Altria Client Services in Richmond, says long weekends with family and friends are crucial. The boating, sailing, fishing and waterfowl hunting opportunities in the Chesapeake Bay make it a preferred destination while his 12-year-old daughter’s love of snowboarding takes the family to the Massanutten resort in the Shenandoah Valley and Wintergreen in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

“When you’re raising your children, it’s not necessarily the quantity of the time that you get that’s important but trying to make what you’re doing memorable,” he says. “At least on a four-day weekend, you’re far enough away to enjoy your family and children. You might have the computer but you can segment it to an hour. If you get away often enough

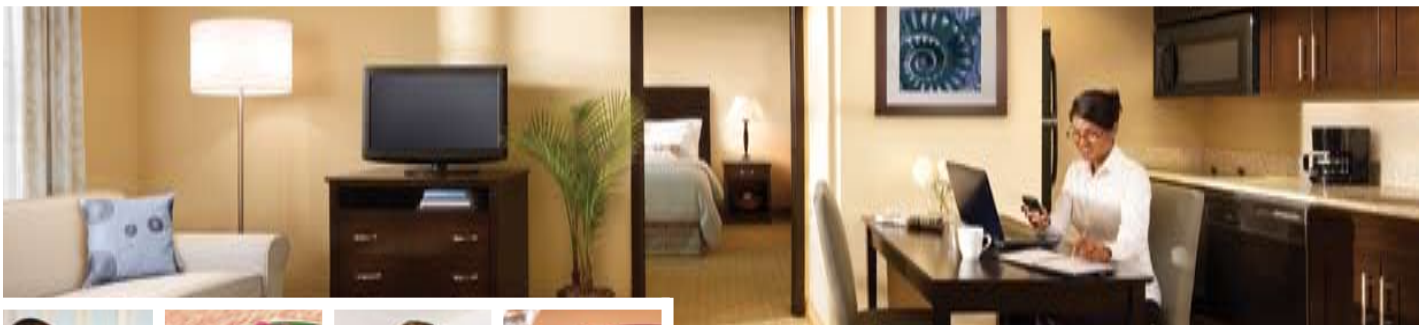
throughout the year, even if you don’t get the long vacations, it really makes a big difference.”

Time out

When he’s in vacation mode, Kirk Spitzer, the retired CEO of Richmond-based Alfa Laval USA, returns to his Southwest Virginia roots for hiking, camping and trips to state parks. The Virginia Tech fan has a condo in Christiansburg that he uses when checking out athletic events, wineries and golf courses in the New River Valley. When he was running the company, Spitzer took two-week vacations and didn’t check e-mail or voice mail while away.

“I felt it was something I earned and the company afforded me, and I took full advantage,” he said of the Swedish parent company’s ethos. “I encouraged my management team to take planned vacations and would get irate with those who took a day here and a day there. Human beings need to relax, recharge and kick back — when you’re doing well and when you’re not.” **VB**

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Coming attractions

Parkway anniversary, art events, highlight calendar



Scenic mountain ranges, an old water mill (below, left) and streams can be found along the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway.



Photos by Vicki Dameron, courtesy Blue Ridge Parkway 75

by Maya Payne Smart

Virginia's state parks enjoyed record attendance of 7.5 million visitors in 2009, up 4 percent from the year before. "There seems to be a resurgence of people discovering camping as a good family activity," says Nancy Heltman,

director of operations for Virginia State Parks. "It's relatively inexpensive and everybody's looking to save money."

Moreover, she says, there's a growing recognition that young people spend too much time inside and are too sedentary.

"Today's children are not relating to nature," Heltman says. "Taking your kids outdoors is probably the best legacy you could give them. It has a de-stressing effect and contributes to a healthy mind, body and spirit."

Besides parks, Tamra Talmadge-Anderson, director of public relations for the Virginia Tourism Corp., says wineries, bed and breakfasts and nature retreats continue to be popular. "What we're hearing from busy working professionals is that they want to relax and reconnect with family and friends." Whether indoors or out, Virginia will offer some new attractions come spring. Mark your calendar for the best of both worlds.

- **The 75th Anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway** ([//www.blueridge-parkway75.org/](http://www.blueridge-parkway75.org/)): There's no better time to visit part of the 469-mile stretch that's home to 100 species of trees, 54 different mammals and 59 species of birds. The parkway, which connects Shenandoah National Park in Virginia with the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina, offers 721 tent sites, 351 RV sites, 275 parking overlooks and nine campgrounds. Dozens of events from tree plantings to music nights will celebrate the anniversary. Park representatives also will be available to speak to civic groups and organizations about the past, present and future of the country's longest rural roadway, built in the 1930s. There's a legislative moment afoot by Virginia and North Carolina U.S. senators to expand the parkway by 50,000 acres to protect its scenic vistas from development.

- **Minds Wide Open** ([//vamindswideopen.org/](http://vamindswideopen.org/)): The first-ever statewide celebration of women in the arts kicks off in March and runs through June. The huge collaboration will feature plays, performances and art exhibits, all honoring the contributions of women to arts and culture.

- **The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts** (www.vmfa.state.va.us/): The museum reopens in Richmond on May 1 with 165,000 additional square feet, including new exhibit space, library, museum shop, café and galleries. **VB**

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