How I Spent My Summer Vacation

By Ellen N. Woods

The Catholic University of America Magazine put a call out to readers for stories of interesting vacations. Here’s a sampling of some leisure-time travels. As you make plans for summer 2013, you just might find an idea that’s right for you.

“Seeing the sunrise on the rim of the canyon takes your breath away,” says Daniel Dougherty (B.S.C.E. 2001) about visiting Canyonlands National Park in Utah. The park features canyons and buttes carved by the Colorado River that offer sights as magnificent as those at the Grand Canyon. “But less crowded and a more affordable trip all around,” says Dougherty, a project and buttes carved by the Colorado River that offer sights as magnificent as those at the Grand Canyon. “But less crowded and a more affordable trip all around,” says Dougherty, a project coordinator for the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the District of Columbia Department on Disability Services.

While on a visit back home to spend time with his family in Denver last May, Dougherty and his girlfriend, Jenna, made a six-hour drive to Canyonlands. They also spent time hiking in nearby Arches National Park, which the National Park Service labels “a red rock wonderland” known for its 2,000 natural stone arches, trails, and beautiful sunsets.

“The hiking is pretty flat and well marked. The views are incredible,” says Dougherty, who likes to take outdoor vacations as an “escape from the fast pace and noise of the city.” He says one of the highlights of his trip was “meeting a couple on the trail at Arches who were celebrating their 60th anniversary. They had visited the park on their honeymoon. They were happy, energetic, and fascinating all while passing others on the way up the trail.”

Dan’s Tips:
Take advantage of the National Park System. Get a season pass. It’s worth it. If you are camping, make a reservation. We didn’t and ended up having to pitch our tent by the latrine.

Barbara Ragan Bennett (B.A. 1971) majored in speech and drama while at CUA. Her career in theater was varied and exciting, from running the costume shops at Dartmouth College and, later, McCarter Theatre in Princeton, N.J., to producing on Broadway to becoming vice president of creative affairs at a PBS-affiliated company.

She and her husband, a retired Broadway conductor and music director, moved to a small seaside town south of Boston shortly before his death in 2003. It was then she decided to challenge herself to achieve one of her life’s goals. “I have wanted to learn to skate backwards since I was 5 years old.”

Bennett signed up for an ice skating class, the only adult among children. Soon she joined an adult ice skating club and, one backward stroke at a time, she was becoming a proficient skater. “My ice skating friends and coaches have become like family,” she says.

Wanting to take her skills to the next level, Bennett signed up for a one-week adult skating camp at Lake Placid with one of her fellow skating club members. She’s been back several summers and has reached a silver level as certified by the United States Figure Skating Association. (One of her judges has been an Olympic judge.) She is now a member of the Skating Club of Lake Placid.

“At the Lake Placid camps, you’ll find every level of skater from wall huggers to advanced. Many people just want to learn to skate with their grandchildren and they end up discovering a lifelong hobby. They are geographically and professionally diverse and the most generous and interesting people.”

In addition to group and private lessons and unlimited ice time, Bennett’s weeks at Lake Placid have included hiking, canoing, shopping, and dining with coaches and skaters. “I’m constantly challenging myself to achieve new skills, meet new people, and keep fit.”

Barbara’s Tips:
There is a summer learning program for just about any interest you might have: cooking, golf, archeology. Take a chance and sign up, even if you are on your own. Get out there and stay active.

Jennifer D’Amico (B.S. 2002) is a podiatrist in private practice in San Diego. Last summer she took two weeks of vacation time and headed to Kathmandu, Nepal, where she worked as a podiatrist.

On location with Healing the Children, a charitable organization that provides medical care to children in need around the world, D’Amico (pictured second from left) did screenings and surgery on patients with neglected childhood deformities. “In the United States when we detect club foot in babies, most are casted and some are surgically corrected, they may wear a brace until age 4, and then they go on to become Olympic athletes, as in the case of Kristi Yamaguchi.

“In poor countries, these deformities that are simple to fix go untreated and the child has to limp or is unable to bear weight. It is socially unacceptable and the child can be shunned.”

Using her training to change lives is a gift, says D’Amico. “The Nepali people are some of the most gracious, humble people I have ever met. It was a privilege to spend time with them.”

D’Amico worked in the clinic nearly every day, but she says she found some time for sightseeing in the Kathmandu Valley. “A working vacation. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she says.

Jennifer’s Tips:
Service vacations often require that you pay your own way. Don’t let that stop you. Many charitable organizations have fundraising opportunities. You may be able to get donations from your employer or family members.
Three Generations on a Lake

Since 1976, Dick Thompson (B.S.M.E. 1957) has had a standing date for a lakeside summer vacation that includes three (four in past years) generations and up to 50 people. “We have it down to a science,” he says.

They start the week with a gathering on Saturday night that features singing and prayer. They all go to Mass on Sunday, followed by a buffet breakfast. Individual “teams” within the extended family sign up for dinner each night. Family favorites are broiled, fried chicken, and pulled pork. There’s a pizza night and, often, a leftover night. Tuesday is pancake breakfast day.

They rent a pontoon boat and jet ski. They do Zumba on the deck, hit the local water park, and did a truck.” says Shanahan, a retired New Hampshire school teacher who now lives in California. “I was glad to help him get some closure.”

Before his first visit, Shanahan made a call to the cemetery. “They asked me to bring information about my father. Now that’s part of the memorial. When schoolchildren come to visit, they will know he was a real person who had a son and lived in Massachusetts and drove a truck,” says Shanahan, a retired New Hampshire school teacher who now lives in California.

When Bill Shanahan (B.A. 1963) and his wife, Therese, traveled to France, Ireland, and Belgium to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary, they stopped at the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery and Memorial in Belgium. Therese, on a 57 acres of green grass, rows of small white crosses mark the graves of 7,992 American military personnel, most of whom lost their lives in the region during World War II. Shanahan’s father is buried in one of those graves.

“He was killed when I was 6 years old,” says Shanahan about his father, who drove a jeep over a land mine in 1944. “I remember my relatives asking me if I wanted him buried at home or in Europe. Of course they put it to me in a way that I knew the right answer was Europe,” he says.

Visiting the cemetery for the first time, Shanahan was amazed at how meticulously the grounds and memorial are kept. “Seeing row after row of crosses and reading the names and finding my father’s name, I knew we had made the right decision. It was fitting that he be buried alongside the men he served with and died with.”

Just one year after his first trip, Shanahan returned to the cemetery with his uncle Tom, 85, his father’s younger brother by 13 years. “They had a very close connection. My father would let Tom ride with him in the truck when he made deliveries. The family owned a charcoal company in Somerville, Mass.,” says Shanahan. “I love my uncle. He’s a wonderful man. I was glad to help him get some closure.”

As a young festival-goer in the 1970s, he loved the tragedies. Then he grew to love the comedies. Midsummer Night’s Dream is a favorite. “Now I’ve come to appreciate the romances such as The Winter’s Tale, Tempest, and Cymbeline. They have elements of comedy and tragedy, but ultimately they are about reconciliation.”

Dick and Sheila’s Tips:

Plan early in the year and divide the tasks equitably. That way everyone gets to relax once they are on vacation. Use email to keep everyone in the loop and send weekly updates.

In 1976, a friend from the seminary asked Rev. Michael Witczak, S.L.D., associate professor of liturgical studies in the School of Theology and Religious Studies, if he was interested in attending a Shakespeare festival in Stratford, Ontario, Canada. Witczak, who loves literature, thought it sounded like fun.

With the exception of four summers, Father Witczak has returned every year to the Stratford Festival with his old friend. “Sometimes we will see two plays in a day and we’ve seen as many as eight plays in a week. I’ve seen all the works of Shakespeare.”

The festival, which runs from May to October every year, also features other classic playwrights, new works, and musicals.

As a professor of liturgy and sacraments, Father Witczak sees an overlap with his theater appreciation. “The use of language and symbol, lights and costumes, it fits in with what I teach.”

Father Witczak’s Tips:

Summer arts festivals have become very popular and there are more and more of them. Choose a location where you might like to vacation and find out if there is a festival in the area. Get your tickets early.

As a military family with two young daughters in the 1970s, Mike (J.D. 1973) and Lennard (M.A. 1971) Cramer did three tours in Germany. They took advantage of those times stationed in Germany to travel throughout Europe. They went just about everywhere except Ireland. “It wasn’t safe back then,” explains Lennard.

So when they saw the annual CUA alumni trip to Ireland advertised six years ago, they signed on. “It was reasonably priced and we liked that there was a tour guide who stayed with the group for the week,” says Mike. They enjoyed the trip so much that they have returned every December for the last five years.

“We’ve had the same tour guide each time. He’s wonderful. So knowledgeable about the country and its history. He took us to an obscure shine in the woods, where in the 1500s and 1600s, back when the English outlawed the Catholic religion, priests would celebrate Mass in secret. He took us to the locations where The Quiet Man was filmed with John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara,” says Lennard.

“Each year that we’ve returned there is something different, but always a great balance of local flavor, history, museums, shopping, tours of the countryside, authentic Irish entertainment, and breweries and distilleries,” says Mike. “And every trip has a pub crawl. You can’t go to Ireland without that.”

The Cramers say the company on the alumni trip is another plus. “We all went to CUA. That’s a great starting point for conversation and friendship,” says Mike.

Mike and Lennard’s Tips:

A guided tour is a wonderful way to see Ireland. It’s a special place with a rich history. The CUA alumni tour is in December, which, with Christmas so close, is a wonderful time to see Ireland. But you will need warm clothes and shoes, and they should be casual and comfortable.

Dick and Sheila’s Tips:

“Visiting the Past

Eight Plays a Week

Irish History and Pub Crawling

www.cuamagazine.cua.edu to read a bonus vacation story.