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Roads to Love

Looking for an Inspiring Getaway? Here Are Four Drives To Rev Up the Romance.

By Christie Findlay
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The water is warmer than you'd expect out here on the Hazel River. The sun slopes through the tree canopy, although it barely dents the brackish water.

I'm teaching Kerrie Baker, 6, how to swim underwater. I'd met her just five minutes earlier as we clambered down the riverbank together, but we became fast friends when she showed me the quickest way into the swimming hole. I catch my husband's eye to let him know how much fun I'm having; he seems pretty content, watching strangers hurtle off a rope swing into the river.

We'd been driving through Rixeyville, Va. -- a blink-and-you'll-miss-it crossroads about a half-hour south of Warrenton -- grooving to the Dixie Chicks and talking about nothing and everything. That's when I spotted a dozen people splashing in the Hazel River and jealously realized that was exactly where I wanted to be. We were outsiders when I asked the property owner, B.J. Martin (in my sweetest we're-city-folks-but-really-nice-people voice), if we might join them.

"This is the third-best swimming hole on the Hazel River," Martin, a Vietnam veteran, told us, speaking over the Kenny Chesney song blaring from a nearby pickup. "I'm still looking for the other two."

The few hours we spent getting to know Martin and his clan was just the sort of adventure we'd been looking for. Because between my three phones, freelance work, two gyms, yoga studio, book club, knitting club, girls' night, yada yada, the husband gets short shrift. Sometimes he asks plaintively: "Think I'll get to see you this weekend?"

So we decided to take a romantic country drive, the kind we did back when we were courting. In fleeing, we found freedom from the intrusions of daily life that killed conversations longer than five minutes. Sweeping along the Blue Ridge Mountains, white wine chilling in the back seat for when we found the perfect picnic spot, our conversations had enough space to unfold in ways that surprised us both.

"I'd love to renovate an old farmhouse like that someday," I remember saying, launching a dream we still share. Another time, we spotted a rustic old rental cottage that welcomed our dog, Radley, then just a few months old. Before turning in that night, the three of us splashed around in a creek that wound through the woods nearby. Both totally unexpected experiences, and just mentioning them 10 years later reminds me how we felt when the relationship was as fresh as a just-picked peach.

For a couple, a back-country road can be restorative in ways that are tough to quantify.

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"If you're working on a project together, like scaling a mountain or even gardening, it's a project with an objective and an end date," says Stacy Notaras Murphy, a couples counselor with Pastoral Counseling and Consultation Centers of Greater Washington. "But if you're spending that time together taking things in passively, you can really focus on the connection between you and the person, so the project is your relationship, rather than the garden or the scaled mountainside."

When I ask the relationship expert whether she takes her own advice, Murphy admits that she and her husband don't take as many drives as they once did. But just a few weeks ago, the couple drove to Berkeley Springs, W.Va. "And just being on the highway, we were remarking on the greenery and realizing we hadn't been out of the city for months. I think we both breathed a little deeper," she says. "And we had some amazing conversation on the way there. It was such a change of pace. And on some level, a little indulgent to take the time away from all the responsibilities we have back here."

After racing between commitments for months, my husband and I realized our relationship was a little ragged around the edges. But when we stumbled upon the Hazel River, I noticed that teasing him as he girded his courage for the rope swing was more pleasurable than the swim itself. And the look on his face when I promised Martin I wouldn't divulge his swimming hole's location if he showed me his collection of 700 hunting knives? Priceless.

Slowing things down during a romantic drive lets you be in the moment, whether you're finding a picnic spot or deciding which back road you'll explore next. "In the smaller moments," Murphy says, "we remember why we made this relationship in the first place."

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