

NOTES ON VACATIONING

I went to the Caribbean coast to relax, sink my toes in the sand, and let my thoughts wander, but returned with a half-memoir, half-manual on ‘vacationing’. The truth is, I can’t make sense of anything in life without writing it down. I wonder if this is exclusive to me, or if some people just walk around with a fuzzy picture of their life.

When I write down a thought, it becomes real. I pluck it from the clouds and plant it in my consciousness. And, as Anais Nin put it, that lets me “taste life twice” – in the moment and in retrospection.

The notion of “principles” is antithetical to vacationing, and frankly quite lame... but I’ve come to learn that there’s an art and a science to regenerative, adventurous holidays.



Principle #1: Walk barefoot as much as possible

I have the ugliest toes.

Half of my toenails have fallen off from all the running I do, and my cowboy boots have bent them in concerning directions. No one wants to see that.

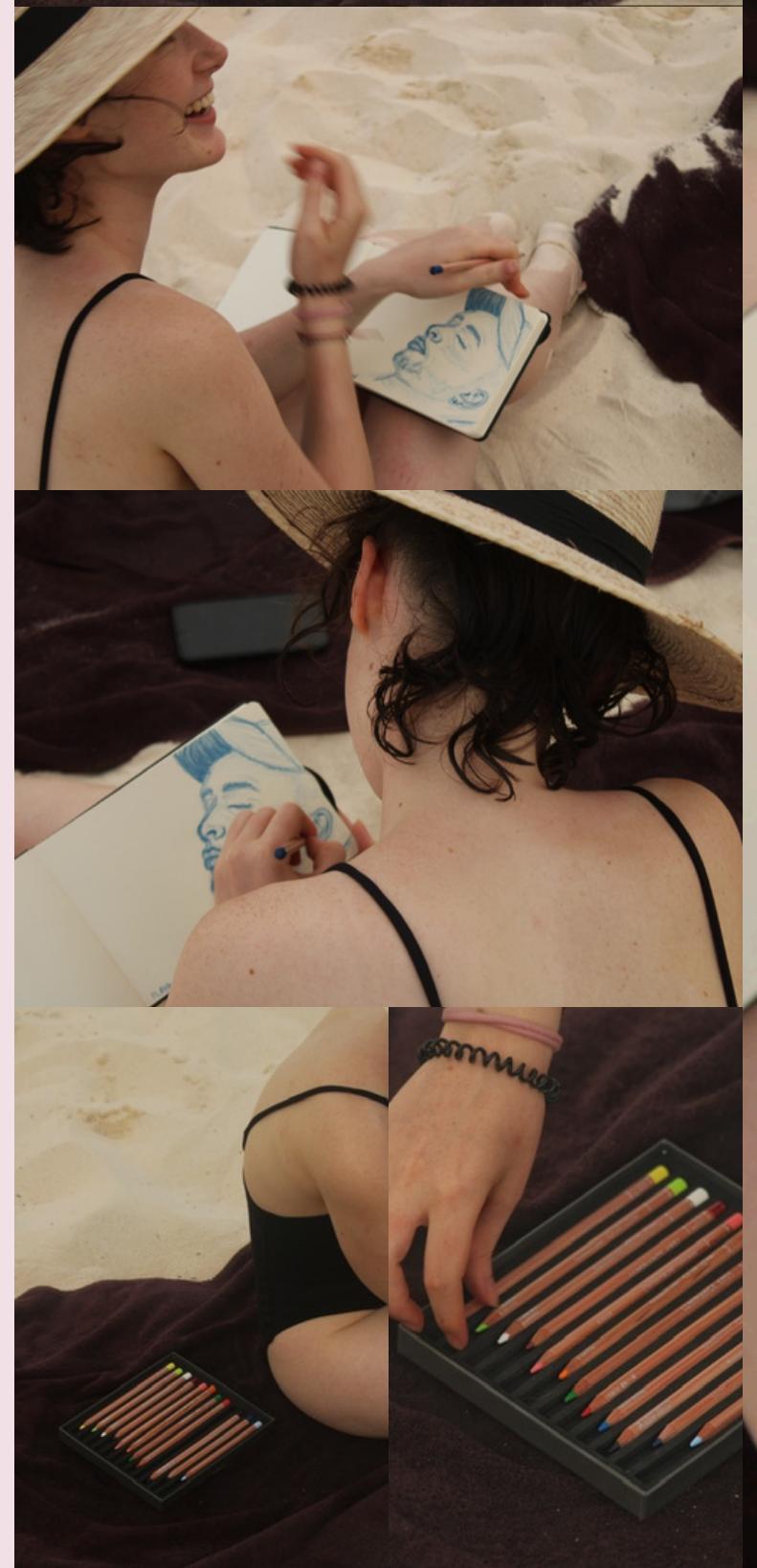
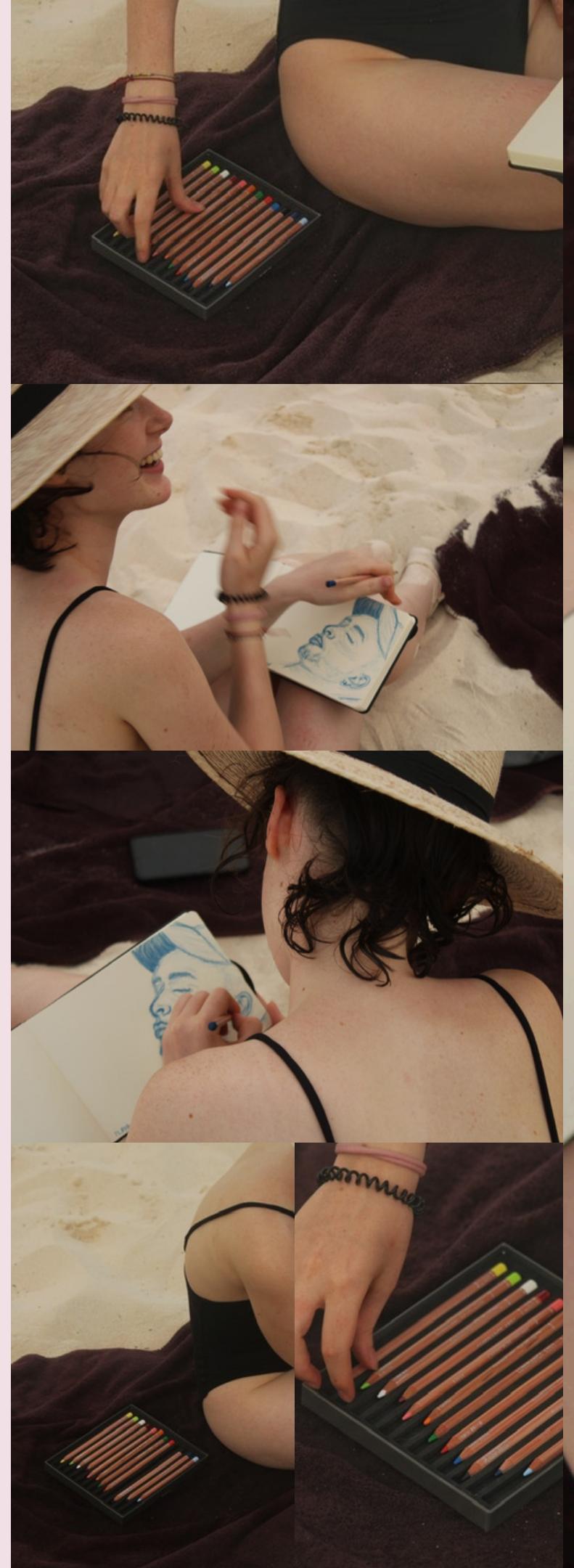
But they'll just have to wince and turn their head away because as soon as the flight touches down, I part ways with my shoes.

There are rocky surfaces and muddy floors, and places that don't look too sanitary. And don't get me started on the sand you inevitably get on your rental car floor...

But you feel like a kid again!

In 2009, you played football in the garden for hours on end then waltzed into the house with mucky black feet that only a swim could cleanse. Your bare feet symbolized inhibition, an end to restraint—physical, mental, and social.

Your feet could breathe, and so could your being.





Principle #2: Ruin your favorite clothes

What a horrible idea to save your favorite things for special occasions. If you get the chance to kill your favorite clothes from wear, and save them from a silent death in the closet, take it without hesitation. Wear your favorite clothes until threads are hanging like confetti, and there's an equal area of holes and fabric. In the worst case, you get a few fabulous wears out of them, and in the best case, they'll be supercharged with personality and nostalgia.

A hot, musty summer holiday is the perfect time for this. On the beach in Tulum, I watched my favorite doc martens chap and crack at the same rate as my lips. I lost one of the laces, and the emblematic yellow stitching on the sole is coming undone. But I have no regrets. I've gotten two lifetimes of wear out of these clip-cloppers. As I leave the beach, I marvel at my favorite things; not relics on the shelf, but extensions of the self. I stand tall like a fashionable shipwreck victim.



Principle #3: Rent a Car

In 1960, Adebe Bikila won gold in the Olympic marathon while running barefoot. He trod through the streets of Rome with leathered feet, forged on the streets of Japo, Ethiopia. Unfortunately, my friend, you are not Adebe Bikila. Your bare feet will only take you so far...

But lucky for you, you can rent a car even if you're a credit-card-less 'young driver' who's never driven on the right-hand side of the road, like me. With a car, you can do a day trip to Chichen Itza to see the Castille temple, or a drive to one of the Cinotes — a natural, transparent pool, formed by limestone bedrock collapsing, to reveal an underground Atlantis.

Having a car will change not only where you go, but also *how you see where you go*. As I've learned from running: different mode, different mindset. You notice the green road signs above you, the children selling jewelry at traffic lights, and the potholes on the street of your AirBnB that become mini Cinotes after heavy rainfall.





Principle #4: Break a Sweat

The sad truth is that on the other side of gluttony is guilt. You can only throw back so many tequilas and tacos before you start to feel sluggish, your skin begins breaking out, and you're spending too much time on the toilet.

A great way to still enjoy the pizzas, Pina coladas, and beach lie-ins is to work out every day. I know this sounds ridiculous, but it doesn't have to be anything intense — some push-ups when you wake up, a jog around the neighborhood, or a swim in the ocean. Anything to get your body moving and sweat those toxins out.

And if you're lucky, your workout won't merely be a tax on life, but a contributor to the adventure. In 2022, I did pull-ups on Barceloneta beach and then through back a jug of Sangria. In 2023, I ran through the hilly Cloud Forest of Costa Rica, and then ate ice cream before the sunset. And in 2024, I ran through the colorful town center of Playa del Carmen before making smoothies and coffee in my AirBnB. Break a sweat to keep the adventure sweet.

Intermission: Henry David Thoreau

On the final weekend of my summer in Massachusetts, I took the train up to Concord to spend the day with a new friend. We went for a trail run through the forest, whizzing in and out of trees, jumping over roots, and panting as we rolled over undulating hills. After about 10 km, we pulled up at Walden Pond, and he said:

"Let's jump?"

Without a word, I threw my socks and shoes under a shrub and jumped into the water, taking my top off in mid-air. It was in Walden Pond that I first heard of Henry David Thoreau and his writings, but his name proceeded to follow me every day for months. I'd see it on books in the library, I'd see it on murals on walls; I'd see it in Instagram captions, and I'd see it in nightclub toilet stalls.

Walden is Thoreau's Magnum Opus — an observational journal of the two years he lived frugally around Walden Pond, but it took him 9 years to complete. Thoreau's musings inspired some of the principles in this project and have helped me appreciate both *nature* and *nothingness*. Here are some of my favorite lines:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

"The universe is wider than our views of it."

"Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."

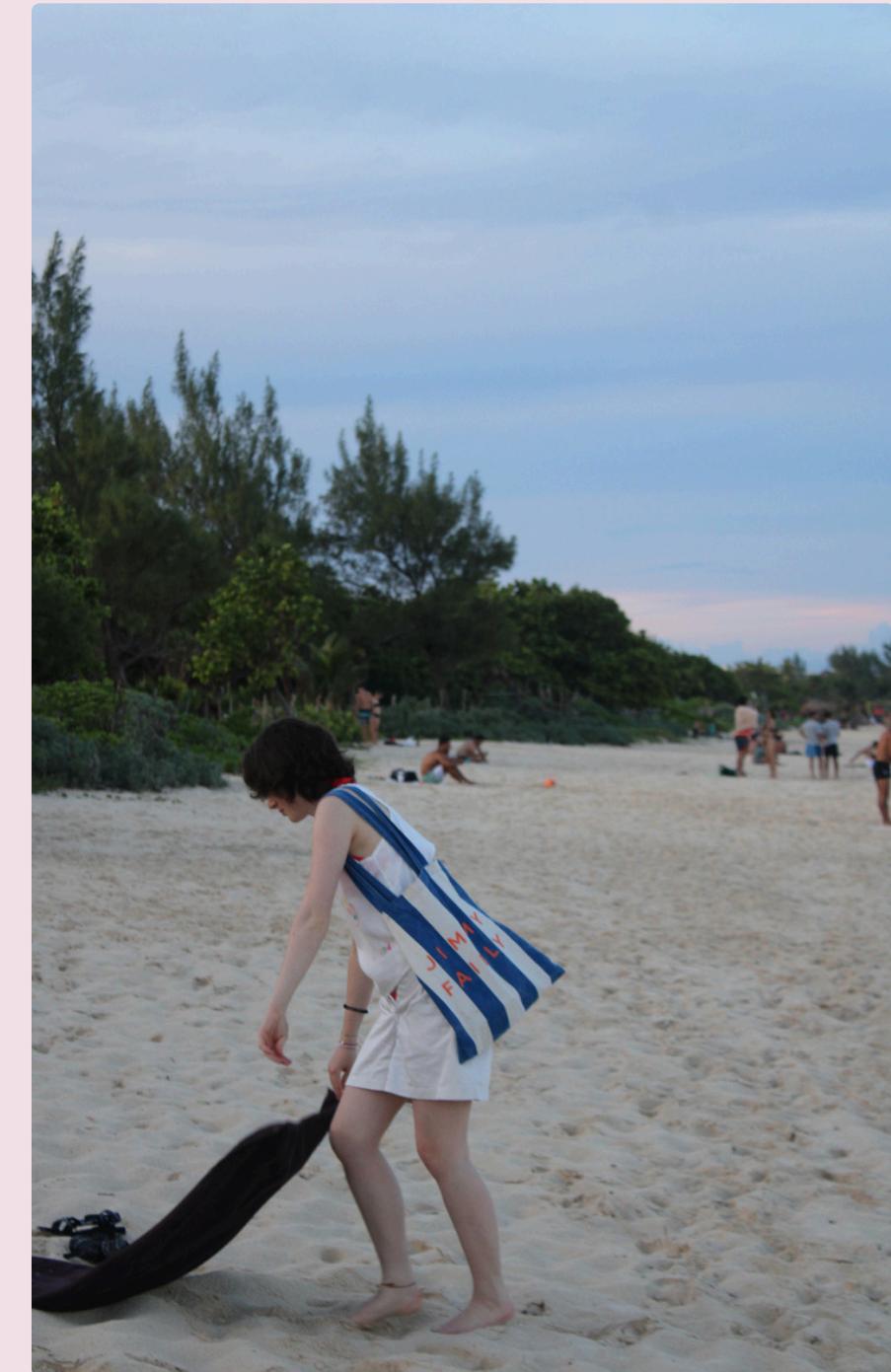


Principle #5: Speak to Strangers

When you say you visited Paris, you mean to say you visited the people of Paris.

I was walking down the street the other day when my nose seized control of my body. The smell of big ovens and sourdough bread was potent; I could've sworn an aroma cloud waded through the streets like they show it in cartoons. It guided me to a bakery around the corner.

Although the bread and coffee smelled great, I bought some as an excuse to chat with the bakers — a Mexican couple in their forties. We chatted about how much the Yucatan has changed over the past decade (a lot), how long they've been married (22 years), and where they source their ingredients from (a trade secret). I tasted the bread in front of them and said it was the freshest I'd had in years. Was I fibbing? I don't know. But as the old retort goes, "What is the purpose of life? To give praise." I left there feeling full. I'd tasted the bread, the bakers, and the city. When I say I visited Playa del Carmen, I mean to say I visited the people of Playa del Carmen.





Principle #6: Take a Camera

To me, photography is a two-act play. Act 1 is “radical presence.” You spent the morning viewing surrealist paintings, staggering from building to building, and deliberating between street food and sit-down. The sun has reached its violent peak, and you’ve been pulled into a state of want and anticipation — of the next meal, the next shade, the next solitude. But then you pull your camera to eye level, and it whispers to you “right here, right now, what do you see?” A wondrous mirage of the mundane and the fantastical is always a photo away.

Act 2 is “curate and destroy.” You scroll through the photos at the end of the day and save them to albums: “Mexico City, 2024.” A manipulator of memory and mortality, you get to keep, delete, and rearrange these slices of your life, tampering (for good or for worse) with how they were actually experienced. “All photographs are memento mori,” Susan Sontag says.

Principle #7: Go places that make you feel small

"The universe is wider than our views of it." — Henry David Thoreau.

Go places that make you feel small, speckle-like. Swim further into the ocean than you did last time, past where your feet touch the sandy floor. Marvel at how, no matter how far you go, the horizon never seems to inch closer.

Stand at the foot of a millennium-old Mayan temple, where games, galas, and grand rituals took place. Be reminded of how vibrant people and cultures can fade into fascinations and myths.

During your layover, press your nose to the glass of the airport's floor-to-ceiling windows. Pretend to put yourself in the private lives of passengers whom you'll never be privy to.

If you don't let it tarnish your ego, it can be a beautiful thing to feel small, inconsequential, enough.

