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TAKING
ROMANCE
ON THE ROAD

IT TAKES PLANNING, AND MONEY, FOR 'VACATIONSHIPS' TO THRIVE

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For their first date, Emily Harrington and Adrian Ballinger went rock-climbing in the eastern Sierra mountains of California.

Their next few dates took place in U.S. cities such as Salt Lake City and as far away as France and Thailand.

Harrington, 28, a professional rock climber, and Ballinger, 38, a mountain guide, spent months vacation-dating after meeting on Mount Everest in 2012. She lived in Boulder, Colo. He lived in Squaw Valley, Calif.

"We really had to work hard to plan when and where we'd see each other," Ballinger says.

The couple took long-distance romance to another level, engaging in what has become known as vacation dating. People are starting relationships on the road and maintaining them via their tablets and smartphones. Such "vacationships" have become viable in this digital world.

"Travel is more affordable and accessible, and so people do it more," says Ramani Durvasula, professor of psychology at California State University-Los Angeles. "The probability of meeting someone who lives somewhere else is high, and so these 'traveling relationships' can often start from the very beginning. In a world of smartphones, Skype, social media, 10,000 miles away can be as connected as 10 miles away."

Hotels across the USA report that they have noticed more couples meeting up from their respective homes for romantic vacations. They've responded by offering more romance-themed packages and amenities.

Since opening in May, the Brice, a Kimpton hotel in Savannah, Ga., has had a number of couples visit on what employees

have come to call "dateaways."

Vacationing couples often ask for floral arrangements, restaurant reservations and picnic baskets for dates in parks, says Lily Moss, assistant general manager at the Brice.

"It's a really romantic town," Moss says. "It's amazing every week how many special occasions, folks getting together for anniversaries and such, come through."

The Chanler at Cliff Walk in Newport, R.I., has increased its romance packages because of a rise in couples meeting up for vacation, including a "Butler Drawn Bath" program.

Because so many couples vacation there, the property has replaced the banquettes and four-top tables with tables for two at the oceanfront portion of its restaurant.

The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort and Spa in South Carolina even has a Love Doctor who creates a romantic itinerary that could include a private sunset cruise or a candlelit dinner inside a beachside cabana.

Couples in vacationships say that while the arrangement is fun, it also takes a lot of work — and money.

Maria Marlowe, 28, a health coach, lives in New York. Her boyfriend lives in San Francisco. They try to see each other every four to six weeks whenever and wherever they can. The couple plan to go to Indonesia soon.

"It makes the time you are together more interesting," she says. "You're more focused and fun. It's fun to have your space and then to have something to look forward to."

Brooke Rose, 31, a public relations manager, sometimes has to drop her plans and get on a plane or into a car to see her boyfriend.

Each summer,

he moves to a different part of the country to fight fires, while she stays in Verdi, Nev. This summer, he was based in Grangeville, Idaho. They've met in Utah, Oregon and California. Last week, they met in Sacramento for a night.

"It's been really fun to have an excuse to constantly check out something new," she says. "Every time you hang out, it's almost a celebration or a party."

That sentiment has advantages and disadvantages, psychologists and relationship experts say.

"You're going to be out of your element. You're going to be away from the stresses in life. Oftentimes on vacation, you see the best part of your lover," says Drew Ramsey, assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University. "If someone has a relationship where they only take someone on trips, that really avoids the nitty-gritty of being with someone."

That can work for some couples who may prefer to have a casual relationship on the road.

"There's a compartmentalization I think a lot of young professionals have," Ramsey says. "They're successful in their work life. They don't have the time or energy to engage in a fully committed, monogamous relationship."

Joshua Klapow, associate professor of public health at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, says relationships that take place primarily on the road can work if each party agrees to the "ground rules."

"Will this be a stable, predictable relationship that follows a consistent routine? Probably not," he says. "However, relationships are formed by emotional bonds and not by physical or environmental parameters."

Harrington and Ballinger have made the transition from vacation dating to living in the same town and buying a condo in Squaw Valley. Both still travel for work at least six months a year.

They still take trips together, but they are enjoying staying home.

Alexandra Jimenez, who runs TravelFashionGirl.com, spent four years vacation-dating a man from England. She's from Los Angeles. Because of work and visa issues, they couldn't live in the same country. So they traveled to Central America, Europe, Asia, South America and the USA. Because she owns her business, she can work from anywhere. Still, neither plans to give up their traveling life.

Says Jimenez, "We are engaged to be married next year and plan to continue this unusual, indefinite life of travels."

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Maria Marlowe