

Cruising in slow lane revs up feel-good chemicals

By Ruth Ostrow

LAST weekend, I went on a trip to Sydney for a friend's birthday and I noticed how fast everything seemed to be.

Traffic was swirling down the freeways and highways at an alarming speed. Restaurant staff trying to increase profits would hover menacingly over tables after the coffee was finished, to convey the sense of financial urgency.

One waiter actually grabbed me by the shoulders after I went over to chat with a friend I hadn't seen for years, and made mention of the fact that the cafe was very busy and I might like to go elsewhere.

Friends limited their time together to an hour here, and an hour there, on the way to meetings or picking up children.

The thing about living in a place like Byron Bay is that you truly slow down. The traffic is slower due to the fact that most people are on holidays. Which can be infuriating in itself as you sit behind someone, stopping and starting and looking at the view, or searching for their accommodation. But slow it is, and once the fact of it has been accepted, then there is nothing to do but sit listening to self-help tapes on anger management or to great music.

Cafes expect people to linger. They are often set up with lounge-around type chairs and even the local picture theatre at The Piggery has beds to lie on to watch a film – which gives a whole new dimension to the idea of making-out in the movies.

I have gone to people's places for dinner and ended up staying two days. Friends have done the same to me, too tired and emotional to hit the windy, country roads. Having sleep-overs and breakfast with friends reminds me so much of childhood and is one of the happiest, most blissful things we grown-ups can do.

From these very ideas has grown a movement which has taken off in Europe in a huge way, and is spreading to America and here. It's The Slow Movement.

It is a cousin of other trends I've written about and adhered to: Voluntary Simplicity or Downshifting, Sea and Tree Change – the idea of pruning back material possessions and work hours in order to make more time for quality, not quantity, of life.

According to an excellent report on Radio National, The Slow Movement evolved in the 1980s, the decade in which the Japanese government established a council of attorneys to monitor the incidence of people literally dying at their desks from overwork. It has taken root in an era riddled with rage: road rage, restaurant rage, rage at being kept waiting anywhere, any time.

There are a plethora of books out now in keeping with the movement, such as *The End of Patience*. Author David Shenk writes that the pace of change is now so rapid that many of us are anxious as long as the pace of change is as blistering as it is today, many of us are struck with the feeling of falling behind even as we stand still.

The book *In Praise of Slow* was written by Carl Honore, who claims that we've reached a point now where the pace of everything has just become maniacally

too fast, and people are slowing down in droves. "Three years ago, I was just Mr Hurry, I was doing everything fast and I was just rushing through my life, instead of living it."

Offshoots include the slow city movement, where emphasis is put on something as trivial as building a park bench on the street to allow people to linger, the slow-sex movement or tantra, which Sting brought to prominence when he claimed to make love for hours. Most well-known is the slow food movement, which started in the tiny Italian village of Bra, and now has more than 60,000 members worldwide.

Slow Food makes pleasure a priority. It's a return to traditional foods and the experience of preparing food and sharing it with friends. It's a deliberate move away from the notion of fast food – a concept captured in the newly-released book *French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure*, by Mireille Guiliano (Random House Australia).

As well as being great for the soul, slow eating is important for health, with eastern medicine believing that digestion is at the centre of wellbeing.

Ayurvedic and Chinese doctors profess that poor digestion and poor eating habits – such as not chewing food properly – lead to many ailments, as nourishment does not reach the bloodstream or get distributed to the organs. Poor digestion also contributes to bowel disease.

Meanwhile, Time magazine reported this issue that feelings of happiness were most often generated during times spent with loved ones, and relaxing. Happiness in turn is associated with the release of feel-good chemicals such as dopamine and an increase in wellbeing. For one thing, slowing down decreases levels of the stress hormone cortisol – which is known to deplete the immune system.

Our road signs say: Slow Down and Survive. I think the new catch-phrase should be: Slow Down and Thrive.

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