

That lonely feeling

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Dale Siegel's plans for a luxury vacation to Vietnam in December fizzled when her friends decided that they could no longer afford it. Ms. Siegel and her boyfriend, along with another couple, had spent months studying guide books and consulting travel experts about the \$7,000-per-person extravaganza. But just as the foursome was about to make the arrangements, the other couple backed out.

Ms. Siegel was surprised by their abrupt decision. Her friends are both self-employed, and though business has been slow, they are far from broke. Business is also down somewhat for Ms. Siegel, president of Circle Mortgage Group, but she isn't ready to change her lifestyle.

She decided not to take the trip without her buddies, though "of course, this has not affected our friendship in the least," she says. Ms. Siegel and her boyfriend have plans to visit Israel in April.

As the recession bears down on New Yorkers, friends that have long partied, dined and traveled together are finding that they now have vastly different spending thresholds. In New York, where living the high life is embedded in the culture, scaling back because of a reduced income or fear of it can create awkward moments. Even those who are still flush are finding it hard to accept that socializing in style is no longer, well, in style.

Where did the partiers go?

Corey Kronengold's party spirit is alive and well. The problem is that he can't find any accomplices.

"Getting my friends to go out and spend money like they did a year ago is nearly impossible," says Mr. Kronengold, senior director of marketing at Tremor Media, who adds that the downturn hasn't yet affected him.

Last year, lots of his running buddies wanted to dine in pricey spots and order numerous bottles of wine, or pay twice face-value for front-row ticket at a sold-out concert. The single 34-year-old, who lives in Hoboken, N.J., says his friends—most of them married with kids—are now worried about paying the mortgage.

"Those concert tickets suddenly seem a lot more expensive to my friends than they did before," Mr. Kronengold says.

One might wonder why anyone is still splurging. The Dow Jones industrial average has plummeted 38% since its all-time peak a year ago, national unemployment is at a 14-year high and New York is expected to shed at least 165,000 jobs through 2010, according to a forecast from the city comptroller.

Adding insult to injury, even an average meal in the city costs \$40.78 per person, compared with \$34.09 nationally. And a repast at the city's 20 most expensive restaurants averages \$156.49, more than double the national average, according to the 2009 *Zagat Survey*.

Gabriela Cora, a doctor and a wellness coach, says people generally feel uncomfortable being around friends who have—or are willing to spend—more.

"They may end up isolating themselves so as not to reveal that they are having financial trouble," Dr. Cora says.

Weird incidents

The fear of hardship has driven public relations consultant Lonnie Soury and his wife, an executive vice president at Court TV, to adopt homebody status. The Sourys, who used to dine out at trendy restaurants a few times a week, are now cooking themselves or picking up a slice of pizza.

Those concerns didn't resonate with visitors from San Francisco, who had made a reservation at an expensive eatery. The Sourys demurred, offering to prepare a meal instead, and got an unexpected reaction: Their friends preferred to have a meal out alone rather than share their company at home.

In the end, the Sourys relented and went to the restaurant. But Mr. Soury says he “felt a little weird” about the incident.

Bryce Gruber, who owns the Web site The Luxury Spot, has noticed that some of her friends have changed their behavior. Many ladies who regularly attended the Sunday brunch she organizes at Le Bilboquet on the Upper East Side have been sending their regrets. She suspects that some of them are hesitant about opening their wallets.

“When friends cancel for brunch, they make up little excuses,” Ms. Gruber says. “They say, ‘I have so much laundry I have to get done’ or ‘I have so many errands,’ even though we all know that’s not the real reason.”

Ms. Gruber can pinpoint when the change occurred: the day Lehman Brothers collapsed. “Ever since then, I feel a good portion of the young women in New York have been off their rockers,” she says. “There is a sense that the sky is falling.”

THE STATS

New Yorkers’ changing habits:

38% are eating out less frequently

35% are paying more attention to menu prices

21% are skipping an appetizer or dessert

19% are reducing alcohol consumption

Source: Zagat Survey

BARTERING FOR A NIGHT OUT

OLGA KUCHUKOV, a massage therapist in Brooklyn, has found a way to maintain her active social life during the recession: bartering.

Early this month, Ms. Kuchukov **began trading hour massages**—regularly priced at \$150—for a night on the town. In return for helping a pal with severe back pain, she got two tickets to The Moth—a story-telling performance venue. Another friend took Ms. Kuchukov to a show at Joe’s Pub, then dancing. He will get his massage soon.

“Usually when friends take me out, I feel like I’m mooching,” Ms. Kuchukov says. “They love this idea, because they get to hang out with me and get the massages.”

Ms. Kuchukov now wants to **take the next step** with her bartering activity. “The dream is to find doctors, dentists, and dermatologists to exchange with,” she says.
