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Posted on Sun, Jun. 1, 2008

Senior Traveler: First-rate last-minute trips

By John J. Hilferty
For The Inquirer

With the price of gas reaching \$4 a gallon, and the economy slowing to a crawl, many seniors are thinking of postponing or curtailing their summer vacations. And they're thinking twice, if at all, about traveling abroad.

A survey by the Travel Industry Association and Ypartnership, a marketing organization, found that 41 percent of respondents would adjust their vacations if gas prices continued to increase, by staying closer to home, taking fewer trips, and spending less money on hotels, restaurants and entertainment.

Sixteen percent of the 2,233 adults surveyed said they would use money from the recent economic stimulus payments for "leisure travel," but only 3 percent said they'd use the money to visit another country.

The cost of international flights makes such trips difficult. A round-trip ticket from Philadelphia to London, which cost about \$500 just a few years ago, now goes for almost \$1,000.

But there's a way seniors can beat the system - especially those with flexible schedules. You can take advantage of last-minute travel, which means booking a trip just a few days before takeoff. In the travel industry, an empty airplane seat and hotel room are like leftover vegetables - when nobody buys them, they rot on the shelf.

You can find last-minute cut rates for popular destinations through Internet travel agencies such as the LastMinute Travel Club (www.lastminutetravel.com, 1-800-442-0568); Travelocity (www.travelocity.com, 1-888-872-8356) and its sister company lastminute.com (www.lastminute.com); Expedia (www.expedia.com, 1-800-397-3342) and its partner Hotwire (www.hotwire.com; 1-866-468-9473); and Smarter Travel (www.smartertravel.com, 617-886-5555). Last-minute trips on these sites are usually good for about two weeks, so when your calendar is open for that much time, you're in business.

The LastMinute Travel Club boasts a network of 13,000 hotels in 255 cities, at discounts of up to 65 percent. The club, which keeps members informed of bargains by e-mail, offers seniors discounts of up to 25 percent off the last-minute price. Membership costs \$50 a year, but the discount on the first booking should cover that expense.

For example, traveling round-trip from Philadelphia to London May 20 to 27 cost \$553, tax included, using Air Canada. To get that price, though, you would have to get connecting flights in Toronto, extending a five- to six-hour trip to 10 hours.

The club posted even more attractive bargains for domestic destinations such as Orlando. From Philadelphia, a round-trip flight for seniors age 65-plus cost \$174 a person instead of \$229, a saving of 24 percent. And a Howard Johnson hotel was renting rooms for \$36 a night including taxes. A Days Inn room was available for \$36, and a Ramada room cost \$45.

When I searched an air/hotel package deal to Orlando, one package cost \$703 total for two seniors, flying direct on Delta or US Airways and staying at the Imperial Swan Hotel & Suites. A rental car (Dodge Caliber) for the seven days cost \$139 with Dollar Rent A Car.

Travelocity's last-minute bargains included a three-day round-trip from Philadelphia to Orlando beginning at \$275 per person, including flight, hotel, taxes and fees, beginning May 25. There was a large variety of hotels to choose from.



KATHY STRAACH / Dallas Morning News

It's four minutes till 4 - and if you book at the last minute, you can check the time at London's Houses of Parliament affordably.

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Lastminute.com listed 25 flight/hotel packages ranging from \$333 for seven days at the Seralago Hotel & Suites in Kissimmee, Fla., outside Orlando, to \$1,877 at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort and Spa on the Disney grounds.

For a last-minute trip from Philadelphia to Las Vegas through Expedia, the price was \$490 for two nights at the MGM Grand Hotel & Casino. Hotwire.com came up with three nights at Vegas' Golden Nugget for \$260 a person, including air.

Smarter Travel offers e-mail notification for last-minute fares from your selected cities. Seniors can also sign up for information about discounts in our age group. This site was more cumbersome than the others, with more searches required to reach your desired information.

If you take advantage of the last-minute flights to Orlando and Disney World, make sure you pick up a Mature Traveler Guide offered by the Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau (1-800-643-9492, www.orlandoinfo.com). The guide lists discounts on hotel rooms, restaurants and attractions such as SeaWorld and Orlando outlet stores, plus places outside the Orlando area, including Busch Gardens Tampa Bay and Dinosaur World.

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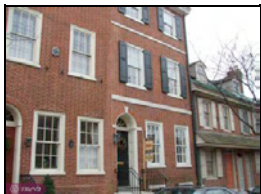


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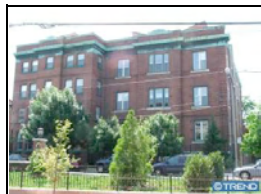
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