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The Philadelphia Inquirer

John J. Hilferty | Florida trip can include free stay - if you're 90

By John J. Hilferty
For The Inquirer

The Southern sun tends to become a magnet for many seniors at this time of year, with Florida and Arizona being choice warm locations as usual.

While the rest of us are up here donning our galoshes, you'll be down there enjoying your cucumber eye lifts, oatmeal scrubs, and face massages. The aforementioned spa goodies can be obtained for \$38 at the Holiday Inn Family Suites Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., but the real deal is stealing a room for free if you're 90 years old or older.

The resort is near Walt Disney World, and the crux of its Senior Savers Program involves discounts of more than 20 percent off the rack rate for various other age groups: \$94 a night instead of \$120 for ages 50 to 69, through Saturday and also from Dec. 1-20; \$79 for ages 70 to 79; and \$69 for octogenarians. The free ride for the 90-plus gang is for a maximum of three nights. Since these are suites based upon availability, the sooner booked the better.

Additionally, the package, which extends through most of 2004, offers a 10 percent discount on all food and beverages. Special accessibility suites are available upon request. Call 1-877-387-5437, visit the Web site at www.hifamilysuites.com, or write to Holiday Inn Family Suites Hotel, 14500 Continental Gateway, Orlando, Fla. 32821.

Home exchanges. In terms of cost, a far more sensible way of visiting the South and Southwest is through a home exchange. Many people are justifiably wary of these arrangements, perhaps worried that their home will be handed over to the family from hell. But the knowledge that the deal is limited to persons over 50 can be more reassuring - oldsters being less inclined to smear the walls with applesauce. And retired seniors often are able to book extended vacations. Seniors Home Exchange has, according to its Web site at www.seniorshomeexchange.com,

a total of 1,388 available properties in 38 countries. In addition to homes and condos, your motor home or boat can be listed as well, and many members will make cars available to guests. Registering your property costs \$65 for three years, \$45 for AARP members. A lifetime membership is \$100.

Here is a sample listing in Sedona, Ariz., one of the world's most desirable warm-weather hideouts: "Two hours north of Phoenix/Scottsdale at an altitude of 4,500 feet. Two hours south of Grand Canyon National Park. Blue skies, cactus, pines and the spectacular red- rock scenery for which Sedona is famous. Single-level home with two bedrooms, office, large open family room, kitchen and screened deck."

Getting to the warm - cheaply. Check out bestfares.com for low airfares between Northeast cities and Florida and other Sun Belt locales. A Philadelphia-Fort Lauderdale round-trip is advertised for \$128 through Feb. 12; Philadelphia to Miami and return, \$178; Philadelphia to Tampa, \$158.

Bestfares.com, a membership program, is a one-stop Internet shop

9 spectacular resorts in 6 sun-soaked destinations
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which also can be utilized by mail or phone by members without computers. The annual \$59.90 membership fee is usually offset by savings on your first trip.

There are senior specials, but you should take a look at the entire offerings for the best values, such as last-minute deals on airfares, hotels and condos, cruises and car rentals.


Other services include a city low-fare search, currency exchange rates, and worldwide weather. Contact www.bestfares.com, or write to Best Fares.com, 1301 S. Bowen Rd., Suite 430, Dept. 1020, Arlington, Texas 76013. Phone 1-800-576-1234.

Working in the warm. For seniors seeking some outdoor action in beautiful settings in warm-weather states where expenses are kept to a minimum, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers posts several volunteer positions in parks nationwide. Usually a free campsite is offered.

The corps is steward of nearly 12 million acres of open land. Tasks including trail building and maintenance, being a campground host, building wildlife habitats, writing and editing, being an information aide at visitor centers, and conducting interpretive tours. Contact Volunteer Clearinghouse, CELRN-OP-R, Box 1070, Nashville, Tenn. 37202; phone 1-800-865-8337; Web site www.lrn.usace.army.mil/volunteer.

Saddle up, Ol' Dudes. The French Broad River Outpost Ranch in Tennessee, offering beautiful views and horseback riding in the Great Smoky Mountains, normally charges \$160 per guest each night during the off-season (Sept. 1-April 1), but this year offers a \$75 per person/per night rate to seniors over 55. Included are all meals, accommodations and twice-a-day riding on mountain trails at the dude ranch near Gatlinburg. Not included in the price are such activities as "drinking at the saloon," according to Shawn Gannon, who co-owns the ranch with his parents. For information and reservations, phone 1-800-995-7678, visit www.frenchbroadriver.com, or write to French Broad River Outpost Ranch, 461 Old River Rd., Del Rio, Tenn. 37727.

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