

TRAVEL

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Bad times, great deals

When Suzanne Schaefer was laid off from her position as a recruiting manager in the New York office of Lehman Brothers in November, she did the things most people do in her situation. She revised her resume. She contacted headhunters. She commiserated with friends and consulted mentors.

And then she went on a two-week vacation to Vietnam.

"For years, I'd been working hard — 60 to 70 hours a week, not being able to take a vacation," said Schaefer, 33, who cashed in her frequent-flyer miles for the flight and took advantage of a 15 percent discount that Intrepid Travel, an Australian-based tour operator, has been offering to people who were recently laid off, bringing the total cost of the trip to just US\$1,500. "I started realizing, hey, when else do you have more than a week and a half to go somewhere?"

Next on her list: South America.

Schaefer isn't alone. As the world economy tanks and stories of financial despair abound, a surprising number of travelers (some who are still collecting paychecks and some who are not) are deciding to take advantage of the recession's inevitable effect on the tourism industry. Some airfares are at the lowest level in years, and hotels are scrambling to fill rooms by cutting rates 40 percent or more.

Just like the vulture investors who swoop down and take over troubled companies at a fraction of their former market values, these vulture vacationers are finding that there are some incredible deals out there for people who can still afford to take advantage of them.

CASHING IN

That's why Dennis Weber headed to China in February for a 10-day tour of Beijing, Xian and Shanghai. Weber, a 60-year-old slate roofer from Conestoga, Pennsylvania, took advantage of a trip organized by Friendly Planet Travel, based in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, that included 12 meals, guided tours and flights to, from and within China.

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BY MICHELLE HIGGINS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

The total cost: about US\$1,400. "If I was going to do this on my own, the airfare alone would have turned out to be US\$1,475," Weber said.

Weber, a longtime stock investor who says he made decent profits before the market turned south late last year, explained that the continuing downturn in share prices persuaded him to divert his money elsewhere. "My thought was, some of the best investments I could make would be to spend my money on travel right now," he said in a recent phone interview.

Certainly, the low prices being offered provide plenty of incentives for people who feel that they would rather live it up than put their money into a retirement fund that may only plummet in value over the next year.

The average one-way domestic coach ticket bought in advance from the US was US\$106 early last month, down about 20 percent from US\$135 in early July, according to Harrell Associates, a consulting firm that tracks airfares. In some cases, fares have dropped more than US\$100 in just a few weeks. A March flight to London from Chicago on United, for example, was US\$475.60 on March 4, down from \$629.90 the month before, according to the airfare tracking site Yapta.com. A flight to San Juan, Puerto Rico, that same month from New York on JetBlue dropped to US\$258 just two weeks before the trip, from US\$374.20 in February and US\$424 in January.

HOTEL DISCOUNTS

As hotels cut prices to entice travelers, average room rates have come down about 20 percent, to US\$180 in the Caribbean; about 25 percent, to US\$119 in Europe; and 32 percent, to US\$108 in Australia and the Pacific islands, according to the latest data available from Smith Travel Research.

Starwood Hotels and Resorts is offering 50 percent off the next night to customers who pay the normal rate at hotels across North and South America, bringing a two-night stay at the W New York to US\$343, for instance. A four-night stay at the Atlantis

Resort in the Bahamas, normally from US\$390 a night or US\$1,560, can now be had for about US\$1,000. Travelers who book an air-inclusive package through the Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board can also get a US\$200 rebate. The Red Mountain Resort & Spa in St George, Utah, is offering a signature package for US\$199 a person a night that includes lodging, three meals a day, hikes and fitness classes.

Even the Four Seasons, which has long maintained a no-discounts policy, is offering three nights for the price of two in dozens of popular cities around the globe, including New York, London and Bangkok. Some individual Four Seasons hotel promotions are even lower, like the Miami Nice package, which offers two nights for \$299 a night, down from standard rates of normally US\$375 and up.

Meanwhile, the US dollar has strengthened against many foreign currencies, making places like New Zealand, where the US dollar has been buying about 40 percent more from a year ago; India, where the dollar is up about 25 percent; and the UK, where the pound recently fell below US\$1.40 — its lowest point in seven years — even more of a bargain for Americans.

'TOO GOOD TO PASS UP'

Travel agents say that a kind of carpe-diem attitude is beginning to take hold among some customers, as travelers weigh whether to hold off on spending in case the economy worsens and that money is needed down the road, or to cash in now while they can on that trip to Thailand or to that luxury resort in Mexico.

"People are saying, 'Well look, if I'm not going to retire at 69, I'm going to take that walking trip in Tuscany,'" said Barbara Banks, director of marketing at Wilderness Travel, an adventure travel company based in Berkeley, California.

Like so many Americans who saw their portfolios sink when the economy turned, Susan Minor, a federal worker in Washington, said, "I did take a big hit." But with no children and a secure job, she is taking advantage of travel deals while she waits for her retirement savings to bounce back.

For her birthday in July, Minor booked a two-for-one cruise deal on a 10-day Arctic tour from Adventure Life, a small tour company based in Missoula, Montana, and is splitting the rate — US\$5,395 not including flights — with a friend.

Christen Duong, 28, from San Francisco, who founded a company that builds travel applications for mobile devices about two years ago, before the economy soured, said, "I'm not taking leisure spending

lightly. But at the same time, some deals are too good to pass up."

After spotting a US\$299 four-day package to Honolulu that included airfare, Duong jetted off to Hawaii with her boyfriend for Presidents Day weekend. After taxes, the trip, offered by Pleasant Holidays, based in Westlake Village, California, came to just US\$330. "It was a no-brainer," she said. "To me it was the cheapest airfare, plus a free hotel."

Some travelers are taking advantage of discounts to go places they have long dreamed of at once-in-a-lifetime prices. Maureen Meixner, a psychotherapist from Lakewood, New Jersey, had wanted to visit the Galapagos Islands for years. "It was on my bucket list," she said. So when she saw that Adventure Life was offering US\$1,200 off seven-night Galapagos cruises, she knew this was the year to go. "It was, well, why not?" said Meixner, who traveled with her husband, Arthur; his brother, Bernard; and her sister-in-law, Diane, in February, paying US\$3,495 each for the cruise.

Vincent Orza, dean of the Meinders School of Business at Oklahoma City University and an avid cruiser, has sailed on more than 70 cruises with his wife, Patricia, and daughter, Alixandra, sometimes as an onboard lecturer. But he had never taken a Seabourn cruise because of the high cost of the luxury line.

"It's always been one of the priciest ones out there," he said.

GUILTY PLEASURES

So when he heard that Seabourn was offering as much as 50 percent off, he not only jumped at the offer, he also booked two. For the back-to-back cruises, which sail along the Cote d'Azur of France and the Spanish islands, beginning and ending in Monte Carlo, Orza paid about US\$6,100 a person — more than half off the brochure price of \$14,280.

Some vacation vultures can't help feeling a pang of guilt when planning a trip while many others are losing their jobs. But the guilt isn't significant enough to keep them home.

"I feel sort of bad where we're going for three vacations, and you read these sad stories in the paper," said Paul Kovac, an 82-year-old retired electrical mechanic from Sycamore, Illinois, who has plans with his girlfriend, Dorothy Shultz, 77, to visit Central Europe, Greece and Hawaii this year, with Cosmos, a budget tour operator based in Littleton, Colorado.

Last month the couple spent five days in Las Vegas after finding a deal too good to pass up: hotel, airfare and tickets to a Cirque du Soleil performance, all for less than US\$500 each.

"We couldn't refuse," said Kovac, who said past trips to Las Vegas have run the couple upward of US\$1,400. "Everybody is hurting, so there are great prices."

