

TODAY'S TRAVEL CLIMATE

What's the state of the travel industry, at home and abroad? Some say it's worse than post-9/11. Hotels are offering bargain basement rates. Tour companies are practically begging you for business with sweet deals you may never see again - like two-fer deals you simply must consider.

Business travel remains in the dumps. Politicians' comments about meetings have sent that sector into the basement. This means luxury hotels at what we call first tier cities like San Francisco, Las Vegas and Chicago are offering rates that compete with second and third tier destinations which are normally the "affordable" alternatives. This is great news for leisure/vacation travelers! When hotels don't fill their beds with business heads they look to vacation travelers to fill them – and they're offering fantastic prices.

WHY TRAVEL NOW?

So with the economy in the depths and the prevailing malaise about swine flu, terrorism and other maladies – why should I travel now?

1 – **Things aren't so crowded.** If you've been to Europe or Alaska in recent years – probably in summer – you know you have crowds just about wherever you are. Now, not so much. You'll find fewer people flying, sleeping in hotels, and tramping around the Coliseum or the Biltmore. Now is the time to have your dream destination to yourself – almost.

2 – **It's cheap.** Really cheap. Like often half price. Many hotels are slashing rates; others are adding lots of value – like free meals, parking and such.

3 – **Gas prices are good.** 2009 may be the ideal/best year for a long while to do a road trip. Fewer people are driving and gas prices remain pretty good – so far, about half what they were last summer. So take a road trip, for a day or weeks. Yes, this may change during summer months but think fall and falling prices again!

4 – **Things are bad all over.** Americans aren't the only ones who are suffering a bad economy. Until recently, the dollar hasn't had much buying power in most popular international destinations. But times are hard for most global currencies. So – this means you could very well go to Italy for about the same you could do California.

5 – **Travel lifts the spirit.** If you're in the doldrums about the economy, politics or anything else, travel can put your problems in perspective, especially if you go to destinations less developed. Seeing new things and meeting new people can help you get out of the cycle of worry, work, or boredom.

6 – **Economize elsewhere.** We've reached the stage in life where putting off travel experiences that might be on our personal bucket lists might not be such a great idea. The clock is truly ticking for us. Consider giving up a new TV or some other "want" so you can get out and make some memories. Travel memories can be among your most treasured possession.

7 – **The world keeps moving/turning.** All those places you've dreamed about visiting aren't disappearing any slower just because the economy is tanking. Rapidly changing cultures, endangered places, and so on – it's time NOW to tick off the to-do list. Jack Nickelsen and Morgan Freeman had it right. Make your travel bucket list and keep ticking off the points. Time's a'wastin.'

WHERE TO?

I frequently suggest to people they not skip over North American destinations. Have you touched every U.S. state at least once? We have an incredible country, filled with cultural diversity and fantastic scenery. It would be an act of good patriotism to patronize travel suppliers close to home! And what about Canada's stunningly beautiful provinces? If you haven't crossed the Canadian Rockies on a train (especially in winter), sipped latte in Vancouver or Seattle, or tasted mussels and golf on Prince Edward Isle, walked on glaciers in Alberta or gone nose to nose with a polar bear around Hudson Bay, there's plenty to catch up on. Quebec is Europe in North America, and the province offers sophisticated urban experiences as well as country charm and awesome scenery in the outlying areas, especially around the St. Lawrence River (which resembles an ocean).

Have you been in all or most of our national parks? Never been a better time. The Great Smoky Mountains Natl Park is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year and even more to do there than usual.

If indoor pursuits are more your thing, now may be your best time to romp in Las Vegas where deals have never been better. It's a major convention city so things aren't so great there right now. And they have many thousands of hotel rooms to fill. Ditto Hawaii, which depends on fly-in visitors. Last time I looked at gohawaii.com there were no fewer than 24 airlines, tour companies, and travel booking sites offering really delicious prices. Orlando is another good place to find deals. Lots of falloff there too in visitation.

Abroad, the choices relate to your own interests – culture, heritage, adventure or notching your lifetime with all the icons you haven't sampled? How about melding travel with your interest in genealogy, Christian heritage, or military history? Read up on how specific destinations figured in world history. Or, consider something really radical - and take along the grandkids.

CLOSE TO HOME

We are indeed fortunate to reside in the **Mid-Atlantic** region. There is simply no end of things to do and see. And there's always something new. Here are some favorites:

Wilmington/Brandywine Valley – Dupont legacy properties including newly refurbished Nemours. www.visitwilmingtonde.com

Journey Through Hallowed Ground – 175 miles of history, starting at Gettysburg where there is a lot of new and fascinating. Paranormal tours of the town and battlefield; new visitor center – www.journeythroughhallowedground.org

Shepherdstown, WVA – a charming historic college town/great day trip/dine at Bavarian Inn or Yellow Brick Bank Restaurant and then do the shops. Good combo: Harpers Ferry.

Pennsylvania – New Civil War Trail just opened two weeks ago. The newly re-done and historic Bedford Springs Resort in the west is only about 2.5 hours drive and it is a great weekend getaway – with spa and golf. On the east side, the Philly art and restaurant scene is always engaging.

Baltimore – Launch a personal search for the best crab house. Historic, funky and delicious. Inner Harbor now has a fancy sister – Harbor East – with new shops, restaurants and arm's reach to both historic Fells Point and Inner Harbor. www.baltimore.org.

Annapolis/Anne Arundel County – Check out the National Cryptological Museum next to the HQ for National Security Administration, then do crabs at Cantler's, probably Maryland's best crab house. www.visitannapolis.org

National Harbor (MD end of Woodrow Wilson Bridge) – great combination with all that's new in Old Towne Alexandria – a rising culinary star. You can drive to both, but connecting the two via water taxi is great fun! www.nationalharbor.com

DC – Penn Quarter with all that's new – National Portrait gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum; Crime and Punishment Museum, Spy Museum, shops and restaurants, Harman Theater. Newseum, Wax Museum. Giving Georgetown a run for its popularity. Hip and happening anytime. www.destinationdc.com

Virginia - Our state is marking the 40th anniversary for its “Virginia is for Lovers” slogan with some great deals and never-ending lineup of new things to see. www.virginia.org/40off. Lots of 40% off deals!

Did you know – Monticello now has a brand new visitor center and Jefferson's Poplar Forest retreat home near Lynchburg began welcoming visitors to the partially restored façade (this is the 200th anniversary of TJ's retirement from public life) in April? James and Dolly Madison's home Montpelier in Orange County is now presenting a massive restoration which peeled back two centuries of changes to the Madison footprint. Central Virginia has the presidents!

Near Luray, the historic and newly restored Mimslyn Inn presents new reasons to tour the beautiful Shenandoah Valley.

And just down the road – fascinating charming Staunton. Great restaurants and the ONLY replica in the world of the Shakespeare’s Blackfriar’s Playhouse, circa 1611. This is one corner on a convenient touring triangle of Charlottesville, Staunton, and Harrisonburg.

For a fab weekend retreat really close to home or an elegant celebration dinner in estate surroundings, check out Goodstone Inn & Estate in Middleburg. And you can take your horse! www.goodstone.com

ABROAD AND EXOTIC SAMPLER

French Country Waterways. One of my most memorable journeys – luxury barging through the French countryside. This year – check out the twofer and anniversary discounts! www.fcwl.com

Wimco Villas – Luxury European villas that can be less than hotel stays. On their web site they allow you to make comparisons. Friends and family can share the costs and you can provision a villa kitchen from local markets, then dine in. This company has a stellar reputation in the industry. www.wimco.com

Untours – how about living like a local? This company provides one to two week stays in private apartments, farmhouses, and cottages all over Europe, and the stays come with English-speaking guides who help you navigate the local culture. Check out the prices for now: In France’s Luberon/Provence region, a villa with 5 bedrooms costs \$174 a night for each bedroom. Try and find that in a hotel! www.untours.com

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR TRAVEL COMPANIONS?

Shillelagh’s – a local travel club with a colorful 45-year history costs all of \$35 annual membership fee for singles, \$50 for couples or families. They are a fun-loving group who travel the world together and manage to fit in close to home trips, like Christmas in New York City and dinner evenings in local restaurants – where you can acquaint with possible traveling companions! www.shillelaghtravelclub.com.

Elderhostel – you can save money by sleeping at home. On their web site you simply insert your zip code and it’ll give you events and travel close to home, with or without hotel costs. Always educational and good camaraderie. www.elderhostel.com

TAKE THE KIDS

Multi-generational travel is on the rise. Here are some sites that can lead you where you – and the kids – would like to go.

Grandparents.com: great intergenerational travel ideas and deals, including quirky museums kids will love; outdoor adventures and sleepover camping!

grandtrvl.com: great DC area company in business for over two decades. Led by certified teachers who make it all fun and educational. Adjunct of Academic Travel Abroad, Inc. a 57 year-old DC tour company that has the Smithsonian and National Geographic among its clients.

TIPS FOR GREAT TRAVEL EXPERIENCES – ANYTIME

1 – Just ask. Pose the question to either your travel provider (say a hotel or cruise line) or your travel agent about special deals going to where you'd like to travel.

2 – Be flexible. Instead of staying right downtown in a city, think of going to nice suburban stops where they are begging for business.

3 – Travel in a group. Group travel is often less expensive than going independently. It's the old economic tenet of buying in bulk/volume.

4 – Travel off-season. Summer is still hot for travel – to places like Europe and Alaska. You can do much better, especially this year, on prices in spring and fall. The other benefits are enticing. I recently went to Italy's incredible Amalfi "Divine Coast" in late October, just before the hotels were to close for the winter. Bougainvillea were still blooming, there were no crowds, and the weather was grand. Locals said it's the best time to visit this world renowned destination.

5 – Transport another way. Instead of flying (which is often most expensive) consider trains, auto, or motorcoach. Some excellent tour options can be found through Trailways operators across the country, for example. This is a fine organization that maintains the highest in safety regimen. www.trailways.com.

6 – Consult cityside and national tourism offices in the U.S. – Examples VisitBritain Tourism and Swiss Tourism in NYC; VisitJordan in McLean, VA. City offices can direct you to good deals and resources to make your dreams a reality!