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PRACTICAL TRAVELER

FOR SOME, NEXT YEAR IS ALREADY HERE

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By Michelle Higgins

IT may seem early to book for Presidents' Week.

But whether prompted by rising airfares or the specter of fewer available flights, tour operators say travelers have been booking unusually early this year.



"We've already booked a large number of our guests for '09," said Edward Piegza, president of Classic Journeys, an adventure travel company based in La Jolla, Calif. Just last month, he said, a family of 18 booked a Costa Rica trip for a year-end vacation — in 2009. "That's 18 months in advance," he pointed out.

Spotting an opportunity, tour operators are rushing the release of their 2009 brochures and prices particularly early this year to capture early-bird reservations — along with deposits. At this time last year, Classic Journeys hadn't posted any of its 2008 itineraries or prices. This year, the company has already posted roughly two-thirds of its 2009 tours online — about three or four months earlier than usual. Similarly, Country Walkers, which normally releases its rates for the following year no earlier than August, made its 2009 rates available online in May.

For the first time in its 61 years of operating, Trafalgar Tours, the large escorted-tour operator, has printed a "2009 Europe and Britain Summer Preview" brochure well in advance of its main 2009 "Europe & Britain" brochure scheduled for release in October. It also published its off-season brochure for European departures from November 2008 to April 2009 several months in advance.

The early releases offer travelers a bigger window to nab Trafalgar's early-bird discounts of 10 percent for first-time bookers. And studying the brochures can turn up some surprising opportunities. For example, the Best of Italy 14-day tour, departing April 7, 2009, is priced at \$3,599 a person in the 2009 Europe summer preview, reflecting a rise in currency and fuel costs. The same trip that departs just four days earlier, on April 3, 2009, is \$2,499 in the off-season brochure, "The Europe & Britain Book, Autumn, Winter & Spring," which uses hedged currency rates and lower, negotiated prices. That means a savvy traveler can save \$1,100 with careful planning.

Travelers who book well in advance can often dodge surcharges that tour operators may add later. In January, for example, Group Voyagers, the parent company of Globus, Cosmos, Monograms and Avalon Waterways, added a currency surcharge of about 5 percent to many of its European tours. But early bookers, who had reserved tours and plunked down deposits before the charge was implemented, were protected from the fee.

Some of the best deals are on trips that travel companies put on the books way back in 2007 for travel next year. For example, Classic Journeys is offering a 12-day India trip in January or March 2009 that was priced at \$6,495 a person based on double occupancy in August 2007. The Indian rupee has gained roughly 7 percent against the dollar since the company set those rates. As a result, customers who book now effectively receive a built-in discount.

June Sloane, a luxury travel specialist at Sue Brown Travel in Boca Raton, Fla., said clients she booked on Micato Safaris last year for a two-week trip in August to Kenya and Tanzania locked in a rate of about \$8,600 a person including internal airfare and extra nights at a hotel in Nairobi. If they had waited to book the trip, she said, they would be paying 2008 prices of about \$10,100 a person.

Ms. Sloane recommends booking airfare in advance as well, given coming capacity cuts. "If you are booked on any air now, the airline will protect you and put you on another airline," she said. "If you wait, there may not be any options for your destination if it is cut from their routes."

YOU may also get a better price this way, as airfare and airline fees continue to rise. For example, the cheapest available price for holiday travel from New York to San Francisco booked the third week in June last year was \$378 on Alaska Airlines, according to FareCompare.com. The cheapest flight booked during the same time this year was \$678. Los Angeles to Honolulu was \$370 on Continental in 2007 compared with \$618 this year, and New York to Orlando was \$118 on American compared with \$308.

Worried about missing out on last-minute deals? Just last month, Orbitz.com introduced an airfare savings tracker called Orbitz Price Assurance, designed automatically to refund customers who book on the site if the price of their plane ticket drops after purchase. To receive a refund when the price goes down, another Orbitz customer must have actually booked the same airline ticket on Orbitz for less. It also limits refunds to \$5 to \$250 per traveler.

Yapta.com, another price-tracking service that alerts travelers to price drops even after the ticket has been purchased, doesn't have these restrictions. Unlike Orbitz's automatic refund, however, travelers must call the airline to claim their travel credit or pay \$15 to have Yapta book it for them. Travelers who use Yapta may also have to pay airline rebooking fees, which can be \$75 to \$250 depending on the carrier. But the site takes that into consideration and alerts travelers only when the price drop exceeds that fee.

Since Yapta.com went live in May 2007, 19 percent of flights tracked after purchase qualified for a travel credit or refund, and the site has notified travelers of \$14 million in post-purchase airfare savings. It now provides savings alerts for nearly all the major United States airlines as well as many international carriers, including British Airways, Lufthansa and Singapore Airlines.

"Even though there have been a lot of price increases because of fuel costs, there's still a lot of volatility," said Tom Romary, chief executive of Yapta. "Travelers need that personal assistant looking for prices on your behalf."

For 2009 dates and prices and more information about Classic Journeys' Cultural Walking Adventures, Culinary Tours and Family Journeys in over 60 regions worldwide, please visit www.classicjourneys.com or call 800-200-3887.