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PRACTICAL TRAVELER

GETAWAYS THAT ARE 'GUILT FREE'

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By Michelle Higgins

SURE, you'd like to take a vacation. But with layoffs hitting your best friends and your own company hinting at pay cuts, how can you justify it?

Consider the guilt-free vacation. To counter customers' reluctance about jetting off for conspicuous consumption during a recession, travel companies are pushing trips that emphasize service, values and personal fulfillment. The message: If there is more involved than frivolous pleasure, you don't have to feel bad about dropping all that cash on a splashy vacation.



Abercrombie & Kent, a high-end tour operator perhaps best known for its elite safaris, is offering Philanthropic Journeys, a collection of luxury tours that include elements of volunteering or giving back to the visited community. On sale now is a two-week trip, Fighting Climate Change in Antarctica, from \$5,697 a person if booked by June 30. Travelers see penguin colonies, visit a working scientific station and help deliver equipment designed to measure the impact of global warming in the region.

Taking a slightly different tack, Virtuoso, a network of upscale travel agents, is using the banner slogan "Return on Life" to promote trips. "It's about spending time on what matters most to you," says. "Maybe it's a personal journey to your favorite destination. Perhaps it's creating wonderful vacation memories with family, friends or your significant other. It may be that you want to get back to nature." The destinations include 10-night family trips to Vietnam and Cambodia from \$3,605 a person or seven-day Alaskan cruises for \$3,295 a person.

"Even people who have money to spend are feeling somewhat a sense of guilt in spending money when reading and hearing of difficult times for so many other people," said Edward Piegza, president of Classic Journeys, a tour operator based in La Jolla, Calif. "But if they can see their spending is actually having a positive impact in some way, they are more able to justify to themselves that their travel is doing good."

IN January, Jill Stanley, a retired personal assistant from Washington, took a 12-day Conservation Safari, operated by Abercrombie & Kent as part of its Philanthropic Journeys program. The trip demonstrated joint charity work the company has done with Friends of Conservation, an environmental organization that works with locals to develop sustainable ways of living in harmony with nature. "We did the safari thing," she said, "but they also took you around to see what A & K and the F.O.C. had done to help the area."

On the trip, which cost about \$10,800 a person, Ms. Stanley visited an orphanage for children whose parents had died of AIDS and spent time with a Masai village and learned about reforestation efforts in the region. "It made me feel good that we were able to plant trees or give in our name for somebody in the Masai Mara," she said. "It's much more rewarding than going and sitting on the beach."

Companies offering more affordable volunteer vacations report that bookings for do-good trips haven't dropped as much this year as those for more traditional vacation packages. Sierra Club Outings, which offers a series of "service" trips in which volunteers can help eradicate invasive plants in Channel Islands National Park in California (\$695) or maintain trails in the Red River Gorge in Kentucky (\$375), said its domestic trips were down by 16 percent for the first three months of the year overall, compared with the same period last year. But service-trip bookings were down just 9 percent.

In some cases, volunteer vacations have even been growing. Projects Abroad, which runs volunteer programs overseas, said bookings were up 20 percent this February from February 2008, with some of the travelers recently laid off but others simply looking for vacations that involve service. Options range from teaching soccer in Moldova for two weeks (\$1,795) to teaching English in Nepal for three months (\$3,295).

For other travelers, the urge to imbue a trip with a sense of purpose is fulfilled in more personal ways.

“We are getting more requests for trips they can share with family and friends, such as celebrating a milestone birthday or anniversary,” said Pamela Lassers, a spokeswoman for Abercrombie & Kent. “They want to rent a villa or a barge in Europe and then invite friends and family to join them. Or plan a private tented safari to celebrate a 50th birthday. Or host a family reunion at a ranch in Colorado.”

Virtuoso’s Return on Life campaign was created in response to a similar trend toward trips that focus on spending time with loved ones. “I really think people are putting their lives in perspective,” in light of the recession, said Kristi Jones, president of the travel agency network. “There is this need for people to feel reconnected and rejuvenated, but not in a self-indulgent way.”

For Globus, a major tour operator, bookings are down overall, said Steve Born, vice president of marketing, but religious tours, family packages and dream trips like Galápagos cruises “are stronger or on pace with last year.”

Faith-based trips, like pilgrimages to Jerusalem or other places of religious significance are resilient partly because travelers view them not just as vacations but also as “an expression of faith,” Mr. Born said. “It’s not a commitment they feel they can break.”

Globus is also offering another kind of vacation customers may find easy to justify — the fast, affordable trip. The company recently introduced 14 Guilt-Free Getaways from 4 to 10 days each, starting at around \$100 a day — trips “that won’t tax pocketbooks or keep travelers away from their daily responsibilities too long,” according to its Web site.

For families limited by school and activity schedules, Mr. Born said, the timing of vacations is pretty much predetermined, and even this year “it’s just a matter of where

and how.” And given the stress of the economy, many people may feel they need a vacation now more than ever.

“I think people need things to look forward to in this economy,” said Jill Walsh, a mother of three from San_Diego, who along with her in-laws has been planning a summer family trip to celebrate her husband’s parents’ 50th wedding anniversary. “What do you work hard for and save for if it’s not something to have memories?”

To keep costs down, the family plans to rent a house in Glacier National Park in Montana. “Four to five special days just with the family — who knows if that opportunity with Grandpa going on 82 will happen again?” she said. “It’s an investment in memories for a lifetime.”

For 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.