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PRACTICAL TRAVELER

LOW-COST OPTIONS ON HIGH-END TOURS

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By Michelle Higgins

WITH cost-conscious guests increasingly unwilling to pay for premium wine tastings, private eco-hikes and five-star hotels, tour operators are starting to offer cheaper, recession-era versions of popular vacation packages to entice penny-pinching travelers.

Take Classic Journeys, an upscale travel company based in La Jolla, Calif., that normally puts customers up in luxury hotels like the Jasper Park Lodge, a Fairmont resort in the Canadian Rockies. In 2009, for the first time, the company is introducing camping trips for about \$700 less than itineraries that include hotel stays. While the tours are designed to be deluxe family affairs (think Egyptian cotton sheets, stemmed wine glasses and chefs who do the cooking), guests must share bathrooms and sleep on air mattresses.

But the savings, said Edward Piegza, president of Classic Journeys, is “likely enough to pay for their airline tickets to the Canadian Rockies from La Guardia.”

Insight Vacations, which offers trips throughout Europe, North America and the eastern Mediterranean, has added eight 2009 itineraries to its European Essentials tours — which cater to budget-minded travelers — at a saving of 20 percent or more compared with the company’s premium tours. But travelers must be willing to sacrifice some conveniences for the lower cost.

For example, the Essentials Spanish Fantasy tour visits the same five cities in Spain in 11 days as its premium Highlights of Spain tour, but it costs \$1,550 instead of \$2,065. The cheaper trip has a half-dozen



fewer guided excursions and hotels are typically outside the city like the Abba Garden Hotel, nearly four miles from Barcelona, as opposed to the centrally located Melia on the premium trip.

“As the U.S. economy began to slow, we realized we needed to be more competitive in the U.S. marketplace and offer tours that appealed to travelers willing to go to Europe but didn’t have a lot of money to spend,” said Brittny Anselmo, director of marketing and communications for Insights Vacations.

Besides being cheaper, the more bare-bones tours may appeal to independent travelers who enjoy the ease and security of group travel but also want the freedom to explore destinations without a guide, since travelers can choose to visit additional museums on their own.

Trafalgar Tours, a large tour operator with more than 300 itineraries, offers its own group of trips for budget-minded travelers, called the CostSaver Way, which are priced at about \$800 less a person than its other trips, but include less guided sightseeing and use hotels in the suburbs or outside main tourist areas. The company has added three CostSaver family trips to its roster for 2009 — a 15-day tour of Europe from \$2,250 a person, a 13-day tour of Italy from \$2,175 and a 15-day trip through England, Wales and Scotland from \$2,050 a person.

For travelers who want to spend less but still want to be at the center of things, General Tours World Traveler, an upscale company based in Keene, N.H., is offering a collection of Best Buy vacations for the first time this year. These cost less than its other tours because travelers stay in more moderate hotels that are still centrally situated. “Location is something we don’t compromise on,” said Mickey Huang, General Tours’ marketing manager. For example, its new seven-day Kremlin and Hermitage tour stays at cheaper hotels like the Marriott Tverskaya in Moscow near Red Square and the Kremlin and costs \$2,899. By comparison, its premium Discover Moscow & St. Petersburg tour, which goes to top hotels like the Kempinski in Moscow, costs \$3,399.

The modified tours are appealing to travelers like Cathy Maywood, a physician from San Diego. Dr. Maywood, her husband, Mike, and her 14-year-old son, Cameron, went to Machu Picchu in Peru with Classic Journeys last spring, and they stayed in a converted 16th-century monastery in Cuzco before taking a train toward the ruins. This year, the family is instead thinking about going camping with Classic Journeys for their summer vacation.

“The main reason is the price,” said Dr. Maywood, adding that she was also drawn to the idea of high-end camping, with its plush tents, assistants who carry camping gear and chefs who prepare meals. “If I had to do all those things, I wouldn’t go camping,” she said.

Other tour operators are shortening trips and offering more flexibility. Go Ahead Tours, an escorted tour operator from Cambridge, Mass., which normally runs 12- to 18-day trips, is now offering 8- to 10-day trips to places like Italy, Greece and China that are as much as \$900 less. It also used to include airfare in its brochure pricing, but as more people have opted to use frequent flier miles to save money, the company decided to exclude it.

Meanwhile, as travelers search for more affordable vacation options, budget-oriented tour operators like the Australian-based Intrepid Travel, which keeps tour costs down by using public transportation, staying in guesthouses run by locals and camping, have been seeing a surge in business.

“Whenever there’s a blip in the economy, we do well,” said Darrell Wade, chief executive of Intrepid Travel. In October, when most high-end tour operators were reporting declines in bookings, his company was up about 10 percent, he said.

Classic Journeys’ operates Cultural Walking Adventures, Culinary Tours, Family Journeys and Private Journeys in over 65 regions worldwide. It has been named a "World's Best Tour Operator" by Travel + Leisure Magazine and one of the "Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth" by National Geographic Adventure Magazine. View a complete list of all tours and destinations at www.ClassicJourneys.com/World or call 800-200-3887.