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The American Plan

Forget Bhutan or Sicily. This year's trendy travel destinations are Gettysburg, PA and Yellowstone Park.

By CANDACE JACKSON

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To lure recession-strapped travelers, tour operators who have long specialized in trips to places like Vietnam or China are scouring the U.S. for closer-to-home alternatives. Last year, a typical Go Ahead Tour trip took travelers to Egypt, with visits to mosques in Cairo, a cruise down the Nile and photo ops at the pyramids. Since February, though, Go Ahead has also been advertising a five-day Civil War history trip, with stops at Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and a night in Gettysburg. Ciclismo Classico, which focuses on cycling trips in Italy -- its 15-day "Grand Tour d'Italia" hits six regions -- recently added a week-long bike tour of the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts, which can include visits to a Shaker village and an antique car museum.

Tour operators say bookings for 2009 trips overseas have declined by as much as 40% this year. Market researcher IbisWorld predicts that global tourism revenue will decline 3.7% in 2009, as travelers stay closer to home. Travel companies say they hope close-by itineraries that still feel exotic will appeal at a time when people are eager to save money -- or at least avoid the appearance of traveling lavishly in an economic crisis.

Jo-Anne Kopycinski, a sixth-grade teacher from New York City's Staten Island, has traveled with Go Ahead to Croatia, Scandinavia and Germany in recent years. Back in January, when she began to plan this year's vacation, she inquired about Go Ahead's domestic options. With the economy struggling, the 48-year-old teacher says, "I wanted to keep the money here. It's not the year for me to go overseas."

Ms. Kopycinski booked Go Ahead's 12-day "America the Beautiful" tour, with stops in Salt Lake City, Yellowstone National Park and Denver. She says it's a trip she probably could have arranged on her own, renting a car and researching hotels. In the end, though, she decided to avoid the hassle. "On my summer vacation I want to be pampered a little bit."

When Classic Journeys opened 14 years ago in La Jolla, Calif., it sold only overseas tours with unusual extras, such as a trip to England where clients arrive at Stonehenge at sunrise, before it opens to the general public. In Sardinia, tourists meet a local shepherd who serves them lunch around an open fire. The company first added a few North American trips in the wake of 9/11, says Edward Piegza, founder and president. Last spring, reviewing results of a questionnaire about where customers wanted to go on their next vacation, he noted a bump in requests for U.S. trips.

The result: 25% of the company's 2009 catalog is made up of North American itineraries, up from 15% in 2008. Options include a trip to Montana's Glacier National Park, with guided nature walks

to view elk and moose, and a meeting with a member of the local Blackfeet Native American tribe, who discusses its history and music.

Barbara and Bart Klion, a retired couple from Hartsdale, N.Y., have gone with Classic Journeys to places such as Scotland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The couple has been cutting back at home and seeing fewer Broadway shows, and for their vacation this year they plan to avoid Europe. They're considering Nova Scotia. "It's like eating oatmeal in the morning," Ms. Klion says. "It's just comforting."

"Comfort travel" is what John Stachnik calls it. The owner of Mayflower Tours, based in Downers Grove, Ill., and chairman-elect of the United States Tour Operators Association, he says tour companies have to be nimble to survive various crises -- whether earthquakes, economic recessions or fears of terrorism. "If people don't want to go north, I take them south. If people don't want to go east, I take them west," he says. His business this year has experienced a 40% decline in international bookings and a 5% increase in domestic bookings.

To sell tourists on the idea of paying for a guided tour to a place that doesn't pose linguistic or cultural challenges, many companies get creative. Some draw up quirky itineraries with visits with local farmers or behind-the-scenes tours of local museums, which wouldn't be easy for travelers to arrange on their own.

Last fall, Butterfield & Robinson, which usually runs luxury bike trips in Europe and Asia, began advertising a trip to west Texas, near the Mexico border, featuring scenic bike rides through the desert where javelinas roam -- and discussions about some of the area's immigration challenges. "There's sort of a ripped-from-the-headlines aspect," says Chris Mark, the company's director of trip planning and operations. This part of Texas is so remote that "it really doesn't feel like the U.S., in a way," he says. Travelers there are well advised to carry a passport, even though they never cross the border, in case they are stopped by border patrol, Mr. Mark says. So far, he hasn't had any takers.

Some companies specializing in specific regions have merged with others as a hedge against changing conditions. Austin-Lehman Adventures, of Billings, Mont., which sells trips in South America, Africa and the U.S., plan to add a trip to South Dakota's Badlands next year. In November, it acquired Euro Bike, a 34-year-old company that runs tours in Western Europe. Dan Austin, director of Austin-Lehman, says that despite all the company's exotic offerings, such as camping in the Galapagos, tours of national parks are among the company's best-sellers this year.

Deborah Lewis, president of Bredeson Outdoor Adventures, in Bridport, Vt., says two-thirds of the company's trips now are within the U.S., up from half a year ago. "Existing customers of mine are saying, 'You know, we're going to stay in the States this year,'" she says. North American travel isn't always cheaper than overseas travel, though. A private six-day tour in Europe, with meals and stays in four- or five-star hotels, can cost \$2,400 a person, Ms. Lewis says, compared with the six-day trip in British Columbia she arranged this summer that will cost \$2,800 a person.

For more information on Classic Journeys' tours, please call 1-800-200-3887 or visit www.ClassicJourneys.com.