

## An Ideal Summer Vacation

I get excited thinking about summer because it brings back childhood memories of fabulous vacations. Every June, I feel the itch to run away from home for months – a total escape. Unfortunately, vacations are getting shorter. Although some families take a 2- or 3-week vacation, most are opting for several shorter trips. Regardless of length, figuring out where to go is a challenge. You have to pack the needs and expectations of everyone in the group into your limited time – even if you're traveling alone.

### GET THE BIG PICTURE

So how do you turn the week or two that you do have off into old-fashioned summer fun? Here are some ideas and steps for success.

- **Length** - First, establish how many days you will be away.
- **Distance** - Next, figure out how far you want to go. Travel time is a key consideration when you decide whether to drive or fly.
- **Expectations** - Talk to everyone in your group over the age of four. Make a note of everybody's desired activities: surfing, eating, sunbathing, sightseeing, etc. Keep in mind that you can't please all travelers all the time. Warning: Teenagers are likely to make your life miserable unless you go someplace where they can meet other kids their age.
- **Expense** - How much money do you want to spend?
- **Effort** - Last, how much effort do you – the organizer – want to put into this trip?

### NARROW IT DOWN

Now that you know the kinds of activities and budget you have to work with, figure out what kind of vacation can give you what you need. Here are the basic types:

- **Urban** – Big cities such as Los Angeles, Seattle or Toronto are great for couples or families with diverse needs. In addition to museums and great restaurants, outdoor activities are usually a short drive away.
- **Beach** – Lodged in just about everyone's subconscious is a desire to lounge on a tropical beach. A beautiful beach can be both romantic for couples and perfect for kids of all ages.
- **Rustic** – This includes camping, RVing, backcountry lodges and dude ranches. This type of vacation is a great value and perfect if you want natural beauty, unmarred by traffic or telephones. Camping is especially inexpensive, but you have to beg, borrow or buy the equipment – and do all the cooking.
- **Resorts** – Resorts are the ultimate getaway: They're usually on a beach with a spa and/or golf course on the premises or nearby; all-inclusive resorts offer organized activities, all meals and babysitting.

Now you can start thinking about destinations. For example, Europe is not a good idea if you are on a tight budget or have less than a week away. Camping is inexpensive and great for any vacation schedule, but it's a lot of work. Hawaii is easy. You can almost jump on the plane with just your wallet; but it can be pricey if you don't shop around.

## **GATHER IDEAS**

Enough generalizing. Here are some specific settings for your ideal vacation.

- **California Coast**

The Pacific Coast Highway runs from San Diego to the Oregon border. For the ultimate experience, rent a convertible and head south from San Francisco so the ocean will be on your right.

- **Kauai, Hawaii**

Stay at the Hyatt Regency Kauai Resort and Spa. The famous Na Pali coast is a short drive away.

- **Yosemite High Sierra camps**

This is light backpacking but with meals and a bed at the end of the trail. These hikes, with or without a guide, take you deep into Yosemite's spectacular backcountry and away from the throngs in the valley. Reservations are by lottery, but you probably can get them if you are flexible on your dates.

- **Montreal, Quebec**

It's Paris without the long flight or the crowds: outdoor cafes, croissants, great shopping and history.

- **Barcelona, Spain**

One of the less visited major cities in Europe, Barcelona has wonderful architecture, restaurants and beaches. Fabulous day trips abound.

- **The Canadian Rockies, Alberta**

View deer, moose and spectacular mountains. Reserve early at the Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel, Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise and Jasper Park Lodge.

- **Club Med**

Check out individual clubs to suit your needs. Many offer family activities and mini-clubs for kids. My personal favorites are Caravelle, Guadeloupe for families and Playa Blanca, Mexico for adults.

- **Hilton Head Island, South Carolina**

Great beaches, bike tours, horseback riding and visiting the local nature preserves are just a few things to put on your to-do list.

## **AVOID**

New York in the summertime is brutal. So are Italy and France, because of the overbearing crowds and stifling heat. But if you have your heart set on Paris or Rome, go in early June or September.

## **Think Different - Be a Tourist in Your Own Hometown**

You have the time off work but, for whatever reason, you can't leave town. I forbid you to stay at home and clean out your closets. (Though I confess I've done that before.) With a little creativity, you can have a great vacation without leaving home. If you can't imagine doing this on your own, invite friends from out of town so you have someone to play with.

### **ON THE TOWN**

- Visit the new aquarium or museum. Now is the time.
- Try the latest jazz or rock venue in town.
- Sample the latest hot restaurant or nightclub.
- Go to three movies in a day. Bring a sweater; the air conditioning will be on full blast.
- Shop at a shopping center you've never been to.
- Check into a local hotel for a night. (This is great if your air-conditioning goes on the blink)
- Get theater tickets and splurge on good seats. Dress up, even if the rest of the world doesn't.
- If you have a luxury hotel with a spa in your town, relax and spoil yourself with a massage or body wrap.

### **DAY TRIPPING**

If your town doesn't offer much in the way of urban entertainment or you've had enough of city life, think day trips.

- Go on a tour of local wineries.
- Hike up into the hills or mountains.
- Go to a beach you've never been to before.
- Go shopping or antiquing in a nearby town.
- Take a drive to a famous hotel for a drink or tea. If you live anywhere in Southern California, it's worth the drive to the Ritz-Carlton at Laguna Niguel with its spectacular oceanfront setting.
- No doubt there are historical buildings or bridges in your area. Pack a picnic and go exploring.
- Go rafting down the local river or go to a water park for the day – with or without the kids.

## Holiday Travel: What You Need to Know Now

If you've been sitting on the fence, it's time to put holiday travel plans in motion. Let's face it; deciding where and when to travel has taken on new meaning after September 11<sup>th</sup>. This year, spending the holidays with your family or taking a vacation requires additional forethought. Keep in mind that despite terrorist threats and overseas military activity, Americans will be traveling – one way or another.

Holiday travel has always been a challenge; this year, it'll be an adventure. Increased security measures, airline schedule cuts and jittery travelers mean that now more than ever, you need to be prepared.

Here are some practical suggestions for a safe, enjoyable, and stress-free journey.

- **Create your own holiday.** If you don't have the energy for a family Thanksgiving at home – get together elsewhere. There's no Thanksgiving holiday in Canada or Mexico. Hawaii and the Caribbean, which are booked at Christmas, are far less crowded now. If you can skip Christmas travel altogether, you're better off traveling in early December when hotel rates and airfares are lower and the crowds are non-existent.
- **Be flexible.** The busiest travel days are the Sunday after Thanksgiving, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, December 27<sup>th</sup> and New Year's Eve. Avoid these days at all cost. Do you want to be one of 10 million Americans flying or driving on each of those days? Consider flying on Thanksgiving or Christmas Day. Fly out of and into an alternate airport: Oakland is less crowded than SFO.
- **Fly direct.** There's less chance of delays and fewer security hassles if you avoid multiple airports.
- **Fly early.** First thing in the morning. Taking the first flight of the day means that the plane will already be waiting for you, rather than the other way around.
- **Book a seat.** It sounds obvious but if you don't have a seat assignment when you show up at the airport and your flight is oversold – guess who gets bumped?

Because the airlines have dropped many flights from their schedules, expect flights to be full during peak times. You can always switch seats at the gate if you don't like what's available at time of booking.

- **Forget e-tickets.** Your chances of cancellations due to bad weather are highest during the winter holidays. If your flight is cancelled and you need to switch to another airline, they will only accept a paper ticket from another carrier. This way you can proceed directly to the gate, without having to line-up to convert your electronic ticket to a paper ticket.
- **Pack well.** Packing smart has taken on a whole new meaning. Because of increased airport security, the FAA allows passengers only one carry-on bag in addition to a briefcase or purse. Since your bags are likely to be hand searched during your trip, pack using clear plastic bags, especially for dirty laundry on the

way home. To speed things up, try traveling with a carry-on without multiple compartments, which only increases the time it takes to search it. Leave behind sharp objects and please use common sense. Leave toy guns at home. If you're celebrating the holidays away from home, pack the symbols that are meaningful to you: a small menorah or the heirloom mistletoe.

- **Check your bags.** Unless you'll be away for a couple of days (and can fit everything into a small carry-on), you'll no longer be allowed to schlep overstuffed bags on the plane. Check your bags at curbside if your airline allows it. Because of the new security measures, chances are that they'll arrive when you do. Also in case your flight is delayed or canceled you'll be nimble enough to race over to another gate or terminal without being loaded down. Your bag will join you later. Better yet, ship your bags ahead of time through the U.S. Post Office, UPS or FedEx. In addition, if you're bringing your skis, golf clubs, bike or surfboard, remember that many large airports have a separate carousel for these bulky items.
- **Bring a gift.** If you're a houseguest bring something to ensure you're invited back. The Travel Fanatic rule is *always* bring something for the kids and/or pets. The best idea is to ship your gifts ahead of time so you don't have to lug extra bags. Remember that if you're intent on bringing them along, airport security personnel may ask you to unwrap those elaborate gifts for inspection.
- **Be informed.** Check your flight's departure time on your airline's Web site before leaving for the airport. This could save you time and aggravation, especially if your flight is delayed or canceled.
- **Conquer the airport.** Get there early. Most airlines suggest two hours for domestic flights and three hours for international flights. Add a little extra time if you'll be traveling on November 21<sup>st</sup> and/or 25<sup>th</sup> which are traditionally the busiest travel days of the year. Also arriving early means that if your flight is delayed or canceled you'll be among the first to get rebooked on another flight. This is especially important if your airline does not pre-assign seats and hands out numbered boarding passes. Leave your car at home. Parking lots are packed over holiday periods.
- **Be prepared.** Pack your carry-on bag with the essentials. Most airlines have cut out food service on domestic flights under four hours. Bring a non-smelly snack or grab a bite at the airport before your flight. Make sure you have books, music and even busy work to entertain you, in case your flight is late. And bring along a change of clothes and toiletry essentials, in case you are separated from your checked luggage.
- **Keep the kids occupied.** Do yourself and your fellow travelers a favor and keep your children busy. Bring along toys, electronic games and books to keep them amused. For older children, flying is a great time to get those vacation homework assignments done. Your seatmates will be oh so impressed.
- **Consider the alternatives.** If you decide not to fly, ground transportation options abound. Buses, trains cars, and even RV's are excellent choices. Since we're used to volume-related delays at airports, these may spread to trains and buses this year as some travelers discover these alternatives to flying. The advice for everyone traveling during the holidays by any mode of transportation is the same. Buy your tickets early. Avoid peak periods. Arrive early. Travel light. Be alert. And above all – be patient.
- **Make the most of it.** Don't focus on the negative aspects of holiday travel. You're not working, so each day can be an adventure. Be spontaneous. Change

your plans at least once a day and if you're going home for the holidays, give your family the slip for a few hours to keep your sanity. Since these are uncertain times, don't forget...

### **The Travel Fanatic's 10 Holiday Travel Essentials**

1. **Comfortable shoes.** So you're prepared for the long line at security. And for that hike to the next terminal or airport.
2. **A change of underwear and a toothbrush.** And other necessities. In case you're separated from your luggage (involuntarily).
3. **A cell phone with fully charged battery.** If your flight is delayed or cancelled, call the airline customer service number instead of standing in an endless line. Catching up with friends and/or family will also keep you busy in case your flight is late.
4. **Music.** Try classical to soothe your nerves or rap to keep you awake.
5. **Reading material.** Look for a hefty book like *War and Peace* so you can be easily distracted. You could always use it as a footrest.
6. **Food and water.** Many airlines have cut food service on short domestic flights. Bring along some healthy snacks or eat at the airport before your flight. Don't forget bottled water to keep you hydrated.
7. **Busy work.** This is a great time to get those 2001 Christmas cards out of the way, or get started on 2002.
8. **Important documents.** Tight security measures mean that you must carry picture ID (driver's license or passport), the credit card you used to purchase your ticket and your ticket (electronic or paper) at all times. You may be asked to show these several times. Have copies with you and keep them separate from the originals.
9. **Sense of humor.** A crowded airport gate is a great place to try out your stand-up routine. Just don't joke about security and don't expect a standing ovation.
10. **Perspective.** You may be standing in long lines, having your bags hand searched, looking over your shoulder and wondering if it's all worth it. Remember, travel is a fundamental right and although it may take longer, the new security measures ensure our ability to do so.

Happy holidays!