

IT IS NOT HARD to turn on the television to hear news of a slumping economy. The bad news, it seems, is enough to keep anyone from traveling these days, particularly internationally. However, that is not the case. Despite recession worries, travel trend watchers say Americans aren't giving up their vacation plans. They are being more cost conscious. With these economic challenges I thought I would revisit this topic and reiterate creative ways to travel. The cruise lines, tour companies and resorts are stepping up to the plate with special deals and packages. Nationwide spring travel booking figures show most of the leading destinations this year are not linked to the euro. In addition, there are still countries and destinations where the U.S. dollar is strong. From the Caribbean and South America to Asia and simply staying in the U.S., there's still hope for an affordable vacation. The top spots include Alaska, Orlando, Cancun, Honolulu, Dominican Republic and Argentina.

The cruise industry has been reaping good business from vacationers now attracted by the value of "drive time" vacations. The cruise industry projects 12.8 million people will take a cruise this year, up 200,000 from last year. Do you remember as a child getting up in the wee hours of the morning to be piled into the family car to drive to a vacation destination? There is a surge in these "drive time" vacations again. As mentioned before, Georgia and the surrounding states have beaches, mountains, state parks and lakes to explore. From a cruising perspective, the Atlanta area is an easy drive to such ports as Mobile, Jacksonville, Tampa, Charleston, and Port Canaveral. Here are some key things again to remember when planning your trip:

1. **Travel off-season.** Every destination has a season that is considered a "value season". This means lower prices and less crowds. January and September are great months to find great travel rates.
2. **Go where the dollar is strong.** Visit or cruise to such areas as the South America, Barbados, Jamaica, or Switzerland. Passports are required for international air travel.
3. **Make it a surprise!** This is the perfect time to plan next year's trip and stay within budget. Also, you can present a gift certificate at the holidays and have the family help plan the actual trip.
4. **Book a travel package.** Very often you can save money by booking package deals that include the airfare, hotel, meals, car rental, etc.
5. **Use promotional "City Cards" to save on attractions.** Cities around the world offer City Cards/Passes to tourists that promise savings through discounts on top tourist attractions and public transportation. This is especially true for Orlando.
6. **Be creative with the planned activities.** Plan a picnic lunch, hike along a bubbling stream, fly kites on a windy day, or skip rocks across the mountain lake.
7. **Travel with extended family or with groups of friends.**

Split the car rental bill or carpool, split the room costs and take a half price vacation. Or rent a house together on the beach during off season.

8. **Seek the advice and services of a seasoned travel agent.** Unlike a mega online travel seller, these experts not only provide invaluable and personalized service but can often times get unadvertised deals. It is nice to be able to talk to the same person when you have a question.

So plan ahead, seek advice and travel! Don't let the economy or bad media take the place of truly enjoying time together with your family. Whether it is long weekend at the lake or a cruise to Caribbean, relax and enjoy the escape from reality. It is amazing what being away from the cell phone, television, e-mail, and work can do to regenerate the soul!



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