

BUDGET STRETCHING TRAVEL IDEAS

Getting The Best Deal On Hotel Rooms

(NAPSA)—Getting the best deal on a hotel room used to be as simple as picking up the telephone and calling the front desk. Not anymore. Today, a hotel room can have almost as many different prices as an airline ticket.

What price the traveler ultimately pays for that hotel room depends on a variety of factors, including group affiliations and memberships. Government employees and military personnel often get special discounts. Organizations, such as those for retired individuals, also negotiate private rates for their members.

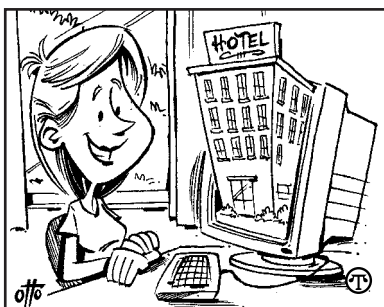
"Consumers may be entitled to hotel discounts and not even know it," said noted travel expert Pauline Frommer. "It pays to take stock of all your affiliations and check with those organizations beforehand to see if they can be referenced for preferential treatment when booking hotel rooms."

Travel dates also can have a significant impact on hotel room prices. Booking during peak holiday times means paying premiums that can be as much as 100 percent higher. Generally, the more off-peak the booking, the better the discount. Weekend stays also yield good savings, making quick mini-vacations a real possibility.

Like any purchase, homework is the key to maximizing savings on hotel rooms. More travelers are finding that the Internet is a valuable source for gathering hotel information and, more recently, for actually booking a room. Travelers who use the Internet for their hotel rooms will find that there are basically four ways to make reservations.

The first is through Web sites owned by the hotels or hotel operators themselves. Often, these sites will offer "Internet only" rates at special discounts.

A second way to book rooms is through Internet travel portals. These are full-service Web sites that offer a broad combination of hotel rooms, airline tickets, rental cars, cruises, vacation packages and more.



The Internet is an increasingly popular way to find hotel rooms.

A third reservation option is booking through a hotel consolidator. Consolidators purchase blocks of hotel rooms in advance at specially negotiated rates and then re-sell the rooms at a discount.

For the deepest savings, travelers can use a fourth option, called an "opaque" travel service. With this type of service, travelers make their purchase up front and then learn which specific hotel they get.

The best-known example of an opaque service is the name-your-own-price Internet travel site priceline.com. Here, travelers decide how much they want to pay for a room and then see if the site can find a name-brand hotel willing to accept the offer. More than 8,000 hotels in the U.S., Europe, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean sell rooms this way.

People who use priceline.com get to specify the quality of the hotel they want (one to five stars, as well as a special category for resorts), the city and section of town they want, and the dates they want. They agree to stay in whatever brand hotel meets their specific criteria and, of course, their price. Because travelers agree to be flexible, opaque services can deliver savings of up to 40 percent or more.

"No matter where you ultimately decide to make your room reservation, remember that homework equals savings," said Frommer. "If you're using an opaque service, always offer a lower price than what you've found elsewhere. Since you're the one being flexible, you deserve the savings."