

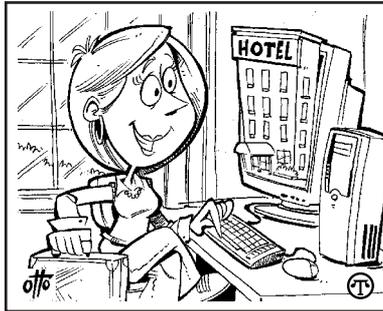
TRAVEL SMART TIPS

How To Take The Stress Out Of Booking A Hotel Room

(NAPSA)—Booking a hotel room can be stressful. Even when you think you got a great deal, there's often a co-worker or friend who found a better price. Gone are the days when getting the best deal on a hotel room was as simple as picking up the phone and calling the front desk. Now, a hotel room can have almost as many different prices as an airline ticket. The reason for the differences is that hotels base their prices on a variety of factors, including booking dates, group affiliations and memberships, and even how and where a room is reserved. Understanding those differences and how they can affect room rates is key to getting a good deal—and melting away the stress.

Travel dates also can have a significant impact on hotel room prices. Booking during peak holiday times means paying premium prices that can be as much as 100 percent higher, as anyone who's visited New Orleans during Mardi Gras can attest. Generally, the more off-peak the booking, the better the discount. Weekend stays also yield good savings, making quick mini-vacations a real possibility.

Often, travelers may not even know they can get special hotel discounts. For example, government employees and military personnel usually qualify for lower rates. The same is true for members of groups and organizations like AARP and AAA. Corporations that negotiate special hotel rates for business use sometimes work out arrangements where employees can benefit from



Your next stay away from home could be more fun for less money if you stop first along the information superhighway.

the same deals when they go on vacation. In addition to better prices, some organizations negotiate for their members to receive additional perks, such as preferred floors, free parking or use of the fitness center.

"It pays to go through a checklist of all of your affiliations and contact those organizations beforehand to see if they can be referenced for preferential treatment when booking a room," said travel expert Christopher Elliott, whom *Parade Magazine* has dubbed the 'ultimate road warrior.' "And if you're not sure whether something you do or somewhere you belong qualifies you for a discount, it never hurts to ask the hotel before making a reservation."

If the cupboard's bare in terms of affiliations or memberships, there is another trick for paring down hotel prices. Go on the Internet and check out the prices there. Travelers will find three basic ways to make reservations

through the Internet. 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 the major online hotel booking services. Typically, these services will feature pricing competitive with the hotels themselves.

Travelers who can be flexible about the hotels they stay in should consider trying a third option—an "opaque" travel service like priceline.com. With this type of service, travelers don't choose a hotel by name. Instead, they specify the caliber, or star-quality of hotel they want and the exact neighborhood they want. Priceline then picks a name-brand hotel that meets the traveler's specifications, often at discounts of up to 40 percent below prices shown on the major online hotel booking services. "On a recent trip to Washington, my wife and I were able to get a 4-star hotel close by the White House for \$85 a night," said Tom Stepanchak of Wanaque, NJ.

Most online booking services offer best-price guarantees, where they will match an even lower room rate if the customer finds one. "Keep your eyes open after making your reservation," said Elliott. "If you see a better rate, contact your booking service. You may qualify for an even deeper discount."

With a little bit of work, says Elliott, you can be the one bragging to relatives about the great deal you got on a hotel room.