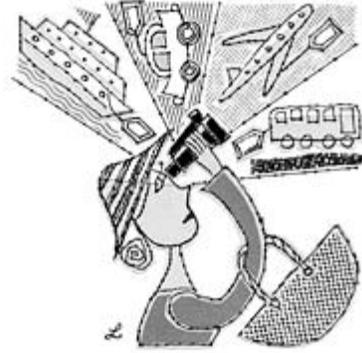


For Seniors, Fewer Deals

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FOR a few years in the early 1990's, my mother, recently widowed and living in a quiet St. Louis suburb, joined the jet set. She and the woolly bichon frisé that was her constant companion became regulars at the American Airlines ticket counter at Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. During that time, Mom dropped in on friends in Palm Springs and Key West, golfed at Greenbrier and in Naples, Fla., boarded a cruise ship in Fort Lauderdale and flitted back and forth several times between home and the family cottage in eastern Ontario.

She hadn't come across an unexpected inheritance, nor was she hell-bent on squandering her retirement savings. Like many other retirees at that time, my mother simply purchased booklets of flight coupons that were then offered to travelers aged 62 and older by almost all major airlines. Each inexpensive coupon was valid for any flight leg within the continental United States.

For traveling seniors, those were the glory days. The booklets contained four or eight coupons, at about \$75 a coupon, according to Terry Trippler, an air-travel expert who operates the travel information site www.terrytripppler.com. "You'd walk up to the ticket counter, flip open your book, tear out a coupon and go."

But by the late 1990's, said Mr. Trippler, one by one, cash-strapped airlines began discontinuing the deep discounts for seniors. "It started before Sept. 11," he said. "And after Sept 11, they all but abandoned them. I don't stumble on meaningful senior discounts often anymore, and when I do, there is usually another fare available that's actually better and less restrictive than the so-called senior discount."

America West Airlines, (800) 235-9292, still offers coupon books to passengers over 62 years old. A book of four one-way coupons good on any of the company's routes in the United States, Canada and Mexico costs \$750, which means that a senior would only save money on round trips that otherwise would cost more than \$375. There are blackout days and flights must be reserved 14 days in advance. Booklets can be purchased by telephone, at ticket counters and through travel agents, but not on the airline's Web site.

However, experts agree that there are still good deals to be had for travelers aged 50 and older.

Digging for Discounts

"There are a lot of discounts out there, and many of them require no special card or membership in any organization," said David Smidt, president of Seniordiscounts.com,

an online directory for people over 50. "But the problem is that many of these discounts can be hard to track down because businesses tend not to advertise them; perhaps they are reluctant to give that extra 10 or 15 percent unless people ask for it."

Mr. Smidt said that his Houston-based Web site, which was launched three years ago, listed 125,000 discount "locations" (meaning that each outlet of a chain is listed as a separate location). The listings include restaurants, hotels, airlines, car rental companies, cruise lines and other travel-related services.

But Mr. Smidt says that senior travelers should make sure that the senior rate is actually the best rate offered. "You have to do a bit of research," he said. "Be sure to ask what other deals are being offered."

"Rule No. 1 for seniors traveling is to speak up and ask for a discount no matter what you are doing - museums, attractions, restaurants, hotels, airlines, rental car companies," said Joan Rattner Heilman, author of "Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50" (Contemporary Books, 2003, \$14.95).

Ms. Heilman, herself a senior, has been tracking discounts since the late 1980's. She said that virtually all hotels in the United States offered some discount for older travelers. "If you are over 50, you never have to pay retail for a hotel again. You can always get a discount," she said.

Typically, according to Ms. Heilman, hotel discounts for older travelers range from 10 percent to as much as 50 percent, depending on the hotel and the age of the guest.

In early June, anyone 62 or older could get a room for the night of July 30 at Fairfield Inn and Suites in downtown Chicago for \$127 a night, a little more than 20 percent off the regular rate of \$160. At the more upscale Omni Chicago Downtown, anyone 55 or older could get a room for \$170.10, a 10 percent discount from the regular rate of \$189.

"Also, there is not a railroad, bus line, or public transportation system that doesn't offer a senior discount of some sort," said Ms. Heilman. "But again, you may have to ask. And it is very important to do so when you are booking a reservation - not when you get to the ticket office or the hotel reception desk. By then it may be too late." Amtrak offers a 15 percent discount to travelers 62 or over, and Greyhound takes 5 percent off the regular fare for the same age group.

Good Deals Aloft

Ms. Heilman said that there are even a few bright spots for older travelers in the airline industry. "Most have some sort of senior fare, but you aren't going to see it advertised or up on their Web sites. You have to call up and ask. If it is lower than other available fares - and it often isn't - book it. If not, don't."

Southwest Airlines, (800) 435-9792, www.southwest.com, not only offers discounts of between 20 and 70 percent to travelers over 65 but also caps one-way fares for this group at \$129. US Airways offers discounts to members of AARP, formerly called the American Association of Retired Persons. Reservations must be made by phone (866) 886-2277.

Membership in AARP, (888) 687-2277, www.aarp.org, which costs \$12.50 a year for a single person or two people living in one household and is available to anyone over 50, offers other benefits to travelers. "We work with more than 40 service providers - hotel companies, car rental firms, cruise lines - and we try to find the best offer that is going to be available across the board," said Hal Norvell, manager of member travel services at AARP Services, Inc., the 35-million-member organization's for-profit arm.

Another popular bargain for senior travelers is the Golden Age Passport, (888) 467-2757, on the Web at www.nationalparks.org, which costs \$10 and is available to any United States resident who is at least 62 years old. The passport, which never expires, gives travelers and their companions free admission to most national parks, forests, refuges, recreation areas and monuments. In addition, it provides a 50 percent discount on fees for camping, parking and in-park services.

My mother has become too frail to travel. But recently, I reached that certain age when senior discounts began to apply to me. I can't say I've joined the jet set, but this summer I'm planning to sneak off to coastal Oregon for a week. I'm looking forward to taking long walks on the beaches, drinking local wines and eating plenty of fresh seafood. I'll also savor a possibility that wasn't available to me the last time I was in Oregon: knowing that I will be paying considerably less for my rental car, hotel room and meals than all those younger vacationers.

BARRY ESTABROOK contributes frequently to the Travel Section.