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## Get Off the Beaten Path for Vacation Deals

By JENNIFER WATERS

Higher fares and overcrowded flights will boost your vacation bill this year, making it a good time to take the roads less traveled on summer retreats.



Orlando Hoetzel

"Considering the costs this year, if you go off the beaten paths you will score some good deals," says Clem Bason, president of Hotwire.com.

He expects flight prices for summer travel—generally speaking, from Memorial Day to Labor Day—to jump as much as 10% over last year, double the average 5% increase travelers experienced last summer.

That's partially thanks to fewer flights as carriers have pared their schedules in recent months to keep planes

fully loaded.

Hotel rates are trending higher by 6%, and car rentals—once a relatively stable cost—are tracking 7% higher and then some since last year, Mr. Bason says. "Right now, the car-rental industry is looking like the airlines, rolling out price increases every two weeks."

As for any summer vacation, the best buys will come to those with flexible travel dates who plan ahead. Many of the deals out there now should be booked in the next two weeks and certainly before Memorial Day weekend.

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Sure, you may be able to find last-minute bargains in July or August, but do you want to risk it?

Skip the usual sightseeing monuments, natural wonders and trendy beaches and consider trips to what are called

"sleeper cities," vibrant locations that aren't often thought of as vacation spots.

You'll find world-class attractions, scenic walking and biking trails, recreational amenities, museums, and hot bars and clubs in cities like St. Louis, Phoenix/Scottsdale, Portland, Ore., or Savannah, Ga., for prices that are far lower than perennially pricey Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon or New York.

[Hotwire](#), which sells unsold airline tickets, hotel rooms and rental cars at deeply discounted prices, has a four-star hotel in downtown St. Louis for \$83 a night for a June stay.

Certainly, the Gateway Arch is familiar to most, but St. Louis also boasts one of the nation's leading zoos—and it's free—and an interactive children's museum called Magic House. Forest Park, once home to the 1904 World's Fair, is among the largest urban parks in the U.S.

In Scottsdale—known for its ritzy hotels and restaurants, designer golf courses and art galleries—you can find a four-star hotel for \$69 a night in June (when the average high temperature is a sizzling 103 degrees; low is a more hospitable 75 degrees). Once there, you can take hot-air balloon rides over the Sonoran Desert, kayak in the Verde River or tour Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural campus and winter home, Taliesin West.

[Expedia.com](#) has a four-night stay at a boutique hotel in Savannah, near the City Market, the historic district and riverboat cruises, for \$1,070, which includes airfare from Chicago. You can take the Old Savannah Ghost trolley tour or a dramatic walking tour around Civil War Savannah. There's also a cooking school, the 1849 homestead of Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low and a jaunt to the Augusta National Golf Club.

Even luxury spots go on sale for those who want to splurge without paying the full ticket. [Sniqueaway.com](#), a travel site for discounted high-end locations, has a special offer for a three-night stay in mid-May at the Hotel Monaco in Portland for \$279 a night, \$40 off the best rate the hotel could offer.

Go to sites including [Kayak.com](#), [Priceline.com](#), [Hotels.com](#), [Booking.com](#) and [Orbitz.com](#) for comparison shopping. Also sign up for the daily deals on national sites like [Groupon](#) and [Living Social](#) for the city you're traveling to and do Internet searches of local sites for more deals. You can find deals in St. Louis, for example, at [ExploreStLouis.com](#).

If you want to travel abroad this summer, [SmarterTravel.com](#) editor Anne Banas says Latin America is the place to go. She likes Nicaragua or Ecuador for their breathtaking coastlines and landscapes. "It will most likely be cheaper to get from the U.S. to Latin America than Europe," Ms. Banas says. "The ground costs [hotels, dining, transportation] are cheaper than in Europe so you spend a lot less once you get there."

Hotel room rates vary greatly throughout the region, but generally speaking, the deeper into the continent you go, the less costly it will be.

Virgin Vacations has a 10-day, round-trip package from New York to Ecuador and the Amazon that includes airfare, hotels and visits to the capital city of Quito, the rain forest and the Cotopaxi National Park, starting at \$1,469.

**Write to** Jennifer Waters at [jennifer.waters@dowjones.com](mailto:jennifer.waters@dowjones.com)

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