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Vacationers Stay Closer to Home to Save Money

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By **Jackie Best** - One of this summer's hottest vacation destinations is not the big city or the beach. It's the backyard.



Washington, D.C. - Scripps Howard Foundation Wire - infoZine - Many travelers this summer are adjusting to rising gas prices, airline costs and the declining economy by taking "staycations" - short trips close to home.

"It seems like people are saying, 'Hey we're not going to go halfway across the country, but we'll sure take that trip to Six Flags or Busch Gardens, and we'll spend the night,'" said Roger Dow, president of the Travel Industry Association, a nonprofit organization representing the travel industry.

AAA estimated that travel was down slightly for the first time in years on Memorial Day and July 4 (about 1 percent), and suspects the trend will continue throughout summer, said Michael Pina, AAA national director for public affairs. AAA soon will be releasing a prediction for Labor Day.

Many in the travel industry are finding that people are traveling more than expected, even with the bad economy and gas prices, but they are finding ways to save money or are staying closer to home.

The Travel Industry Association released a survey Aug. 8 that found that about 14 percent of people surveyed had planned a "staycation" in the last six months because of high gas prices, travel expenses or because they were trying to cut back on discretionary spending.

"For the most part, people are still traveling. They are just changing their behaviors. Maybe they are looking at it as a basket of goods and services, so they might be trading in on hotels," said Joe Wheeling, chief executive officer of Red Roof Inns. Instead of staying at a fancy hotel, they choose a less expensive one. His company's business is down from last year but less so than other hotel chains.

Jeff Naylor, 38, and his family came to Washington on vacation from Charleston, W. Va., this summer.

"We travel about the same, but cut back on other things, like fancy restaurants," he said. "We don't spend as much money when we get into town."

Naylor, who works in commercial refrigeration, came to visit relatives before his kids go

back to school.

Bed and breakfasts are hosting more travelers, said Mary White, president of BnBfinder.com.

"With B and Bs, you can drive to the next town and stay someplace completely different and really feel like you have gotten away," White said.

Some tourism offices are marketing locally for people who want to go on a "staycation," such as the Cleveland Visitor's Bureau, which advertises on pizza boxes and at gas stations.

The Chicago Office of Tourism is also marketing locally, including a Web site, www.summerinchicago.com, that lists free activities.

"People in the area only explore it or experience it when they have out-of-town visitors. When people are looking to save money, we are encouraging them to explore right here at home," said Karen Ryan, manager of communications for the Chicago Office of Tourism.

But Dr. Doreen Orion, psychiatrist and author of the book "Queen of the Road," said "staycations" have some downsides.

"When most of us dream about getting away from it all, we really mean we want to get away from it all. I don't think most of us can really relax and recharge when we still have the usual surroundings," Orion said. "I think that part of the joy of traveling is you are meeting other people who are also away and you can share experiences with them. And going elsewhere on vacation is a wonderful way to keep ourselves stimulated."

She said travelers should keep in mind that, while they are on vacation, they will not be driving in separate cars to work. If gas prices are a concern, they could consider taking a vacation somewhere that offers public transportation.

Travelers are also making decisions between flying and driving.

Linda Bates, 58, came to Washington on vacation from Melbourne, Fla., this summer with her daughter. The medical secretary said she calculated the costs of flying, driving or renting a car and found driving was the least expensive, even with the high gas prices.

They also traveled to Indiana and Michigan to visit friends and family. While in Washington, they visited some of the war memorials and Arlington National Cemetery.

The Air Transport Association predicted only a 1 percent decrease in air travel compared to last summer, said David A. Castelveter, ATA spokesman.

He said most people had already booked flights before airlines started charging for luggage and on-board services such as soft drinks, but people who didn't start planning vacations until May might have chosen not to fly.

International travel has decreased a lot more than domestic travel, said Assen Vassilev, co-founder of Lessno.com, an international discount travel Web site.

He said his Web site has more business because it often offers airline prices 25 to 30

percent below many other discount airline Web sites because it searches regular airlines and low-cost airlines. He said people should look at four or five Web sites before booking a ticket to make sure they have the best price.

Many hotels are offering deals to attract travelers. Red Roof Inn is offering prizes and \$25 gas cards at some beach locations. Loews Hotels reimburse travelers for airline baggage charges, and some Kimpton Hotels in San Francisco are offering a 20 percent discount to customers who travel by railroad.

"This thing we call vacations and travel seems to be almost a right that people demand and want to have," Dow said. "When gas went over \$2, five or six years ago, then over \$3, then \$4, it just says to me that American people are a little more resilient and finding ways if they want to get away."



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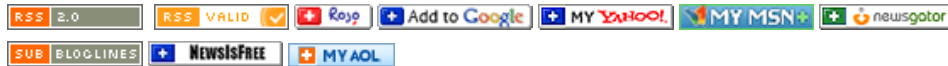
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