

Many travel discounts still exist for senior citizens

By Jane Engle, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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The sun has set on fare discounts for hundreds of thousands of senior fliers. Blame airline cutbacks.

But travelers 62 and older, and sometimes as young as 50, can still land special deals for hotel rooms, rental cars, meals and even a few plane seats.

Here's a quick survey of where the senior savings are -- or aren't -- and tips to ensure that you get a deal:

Airlines: Once common, discounted airfares for seniors are getting scarce.

United Airlines, www.united.com, on July 1 stopped accepting new members for its Silver Wings program, which offers double mileage, flight vouchers and special zoned fares for customers 55 and older. (Some current members can still access certain benefits.) In a statement on the program's website, www.silverwingsplus.com, United said it took the action to "control costs, optimize revenue and respond to customer feedback."

Among the savings for the airline is the cost of paying vendors to operate the program, spokesman Jeff Kovick said.

Fewer than 1% of the nearly 50 million frequent fliers in United's Mileage Plus program belong to Silver Wings, Kovick said, although he declined to provide an exact number or to say whether membership had been increasing or falling.

Earlier this month Virgin Atlantic eliminated senior discounts. And in 2005 America West got rid of its Senior Saver Pack, a four-coupon discount book, and American Airlines stopped offering senior discounts except for certain fare classes to Chile, Ecuador, Honduras and Panama.

"The issue, frankly, is that fares are so cheap today," said American spokesman Tim Wagner. Because senior discounts may not apply to the lowest fares, older fliers sometimes are better off booking at market rates, he added.

ATA, Continental and Southwest are among carriers that still offer senior savings in at least some markets, said David Smidt, president of www.seniordiscounts.com, a 6-year-old consumer site.

Hotels and rental cars: Senior discounts, typically 10% to 15%, are common, but you may need to call a reservations agent or dig deep into the company's website to find them.

"A lot of companies don't advertise what the discounts are," Smidt said.

One exception is www.hyatt.com, which lists "Senior Rates" under "Special Offers" on its home page. More often, companies offer such rates as pull-down menu options under "Special Rates."

Still stumped? Try doing a Web search using the company's name and the term "senior discounts."

When booking by phone, Smidt suggested, first ask for the best price and then ask whether you can get a senior discount off that price, which may save you an extra 10% -- or not. Some companies won't give the discount off their lowest prices.

Restaurants: Many chains offer senior meal deals, sometimes to people as young as 50. Again, you need to ask.

Getting the best deal: The first step is to research, online or by phone, the lowest price the company offers for the dates you want. Then see whether the senior rate beats this so-called "best available rate."

When I recently went onto www.starwoodhotels.com to check prices for a Sept. 18 to 20 stay at the St. Regis Resort, Monarch Beach, the best available rate was \$395 a night for a garden-view king room. The senior discount and AAA rates were \$455.

When I did a similar search on www.hyatt.com for a Sept. 21 stay at the Hyatt Regency San Francisco, the best available and "AAA Promo" rates were \$179 per night. The "senior citizen" rate was \$159.20.

On Southwest's site, www.southwest.com, the senior fare for a Sept. 18 to 20 round trip from LAX to Phoenix was \$164, compared with a \$98 Web-only fare and a \$242 "refundable anytime" fare.

Although price is important, it's not the whole story.

With Southwest's senior and "refundable anytime" fares, you can get a credit card refund if you cancel, but on Internet-only fares you must apply the funds to a future flight, said spokeswoman Whitney Eichinger.

At some places, seniors can get deals even after other special rates have sold out.

"Senior discounts are great if you're going at the last minute or traveling during peak times," Smidt said.

Smidt's website, which lists thousands of travel and other senior deals, charges \$7.95 and up for annual memberships. AARP, also a good source for deals, charges \$12.50 per year [for memberships](#).

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