

Jane Engle:
Travel Insider
August 8, 2002

Seniors Find More Deals on Land Than in the Air

Several major airlines cancel coupon programs, but some hotel chains are still courting older vacationers.

The golden years lost a little of their luster this summer when several airlines ended discount programs for seniors. But that's no reason to tear up your AARP card. There are plenty of deals, in the air and on the ground, for older travelers.

A new online guide, www.seniordiscount.com, has expanded from 25,000 listings of travel and other deals to more than 115,000 since its launch last year, says David Smidt, the president and chief executive.

Joan Rattner Heilman, author of an annual guide to senior discounts, is seeing no reduction in deals as she works on the 2003 edition of "Unbelievably Good Deals & Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50," due out next spring (Contemporary Books; \$14.95 for 2002 edition).

In fact, "hotels are trying even more eagerly" to court the older set as occupancy rates have sagged, she says. Since 1988 her book has grown to 311 pages from 220, and its list of hotel chains offering senior discounts has nearly tripled.

"We haven't seen any ... tailing off in offers," says Tom Ottwell, spokesman for AARP, which affords travel and other discounts for its slightly more than 35 million members, all 50 or older. (For a list of offers, visit www.aarp.org.)

The airline industry is an exception.

In the last couple of months, several major airlines stopped selling discount coupons to seniors. Typically, such books contained four coupons, each good for one-way travel in the U.S. (and sometimes Canada and Mexico) that had to be completed within a year of purchase. Prices varied but usually hovered around \$150 or \$175 per coupon--a good deal for some but not all flights, depending on fares in a particular market.

Some majors also ended 10% across-the-board discounts for seniors, usually replacing them with more restricted fares and raising the age of eligibility from 62 to 65.

Cash-strapped airlines say the changes save them money and spare them and customers the inconvenience of handling paper coupons. They also note that leisure fares have dropped so low, especially on the Internet, that coupons aren't the deal they once were.

Others question the moves.

"The wisdom of trying to eliminate [senior] discounts ... escapes me completely," says Peter C. Yesawich, president of the Orlando, Fla.-based marketing firm Yesawich, Pepperdine & Brown. Seniors represent a huge market that is "remarkably price-and value-sensitive," given that incomes typically drop by 60% to 70% after retirement, he says. He suspects discounts may return when the airline business improves.

In an informal online sampling by www.seniordiscount.com that had drawn over 1,000 replies as of last week, more than 40% of respondents said they would switch to other airlines to counter the cutbacks, and nearly as many said they would look for discounted Internet fares.

Here are some airlines that still had senior deals as of the Travel section's deadline Tuesday. Some apply the discount to a traveling companion too; check with the airline for details. An important caveat: The senior deal may not be the lowest fare you can get. "Don't just ask for the senior fare," says David Castelveter, a spokesman for US Airways. "Ask for the lowest fare on the market." And be sure to check the airline's Web site.

* America West: A 10% discount off most fares is available for passengers 62 or older; not available on Internet-only fares, although you can reserve online. A "Senior Saver Pack" with four flight coupons costs \$596, or \$149 per one-way trip.

* American, Continental and Northwest offer a senior fare, requiring a 14-day advance purchase, that takes about 10% off the lowest available fare in that category. You must be 65 or older. At Northwest, the senior fare allows stays up to 180 days versus 30 days for a regular leisure fare. (Last month Continental ended its well-regarded Freedom Flight Club, with discounts of up to 20% for seniors 62 and older.)

* Southwest: Discounts vary from 20% to 67% off regular full fares; in any case, the senior fare won't be more than \$129 each way, a spokeswoman says. You must be 65 or older. The senior discount can be combined with other discounts. It does not apply to traveling companions younger than 65, and it is not available on the Web; you must call Southwest's toll-free number, (800) 435-9792.

* United: Senior fare, requiring 14-day advance purchase, takes about 10% off the lowest available fare in that category. You must be 65 or older. There's also a Silver Wings Plus club, starting at \$75 for a two-year membership, for ages 55 and older with discounts on air fares, car rentals, cruises and hotels; details at www.silverwingsplus.com.

As for major hotel chains, years ago they offered senior discounts up to 25%; now they're typically 10%, author Heilman says. But a few are more generous. The same caveat applies here as for airlines: Be sure to ask for the lowest available rate, which may not be the senior rate. Discounts may not be available when the hotel is heavily booked, such as Christmas week.

Among the chain-hotel deals:

* Days Inn: You can better its usual discount of 10% (for seniors 60 or older or for members of "any senior citizen organization") by joining the free September Days Club, which offers 15% to 50% off standard rates for those 50 and older. (800) 241-5050, www.daysinn.com.

* Hyatt: Seniors save up to 50% at "participating" Hyatt hotels, says the Internet site www.hyatt.com. (Translation: Senior discounts may not be available at all hotels, a common caveat.) You must be at least 62. When I checked rates on the Web site last week for a September stay at the Hyatt at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, the "Senior Citizen Guestroom" rate was \$139 per night, beating the \$189 "Special Rate Guestroom" and the \$149 "AAA Promo Rate Guestroom."

* Marriott: AARP members save 10% off the regular room rate or the Marriott corporate rate, whichever is less. But members can save more, at least half off regular rates, subject to availability, if they book 21 days in advance. An important note: The 21-day rate is nonrefundable. An added bonus for AARP members is 20% off food and nonalcoholic beverages for up to eight people at hotel restaurants.

* Radisson Hotels & Resorts: The "Senior Breaks" program offers 25% to 40% off standard rates. You must be 50 or older in the U.S. and Canada to qualify; 65 or older in Europe and Australia. Many hotel restaurants also give discounts in off-peak dining hours.

When traveling, don't forget to ask about senior or AARP rates for movie tickets, car rentals, ski-lift tickets, park entrances and even retail stores. The list is nearly endless and, experts say, not likely to dwindle soon.

Jane Engle welcomes comments and suggestions but cannot respond individually to letters and calls. Write Travel Insider, Los Angeles Times, 202 W. 1st St., Los Angeles, CA 90012, or e-mail jane.Engle@latimes.com.