

Travel discounts drying up for senior citizens

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By David Bear, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Once upon a time, older travelers got big travel discounts that could significantly reduce the cost of their trips.

Many of those benefits have evaporated in recent years, however, as airlines have all but erased such terms as "senior citizen" and "golden-ager" from their lexicons.

But according to Joan Rattner Heilman, "senior discounts can still be found, if you know where to look, when to ask and always carry proof of age." She should know, having recently finished the 17th edition of her book "Unbelievable Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get Unless You're Over 50."

Here's a roundup of some senior possibilities.

■ **Air fares:** Among the 11 airlines that serve Pittsburgh International, Southwest regularly offers special fares for seniors age 65 or older. Seniors pay reduced rates, up to a maximum of \$129 each way, plus tax and fees. These fares can be booked easily online or on the phone, but passengers must be ready to provide proof of age at check-in. Southwest's senior discount tickets also are generally available, are changeable without a fee and fully refundable.

Edith Nagin, an active 85-year old Shadyside resident, travels frequently to Phoenix and takes advantage of Southwest's special senior fares.

"I've been very happy with their service and senior fares, but sometimes they offer even better promotional specials," she said. "So I always make sure to ask if there's a lower fare."

United Airlines is the only other carrier with a special program for seniors. Its Silver Wings Plus club, www.silverwingsplus.com, is for passengers 55 and older. An annual membership costs \$240 per person, which includes \$300 in travel credits. Members qualify for special rates on domestic and international trips priced according to the distance they're flying. Silver Wing fares begin at \$169 round trip, with double mileage credits and no blackout dates.

Among the other carriers, American, Continental, Delta and Northwest offer some discounts for seniors, but only on selected routes. So you must check for each particular trip. These discounts are sporadic at best, and chances are good that seniors will wind up paying the same rates as other adults. The rest of the airlines, Air Canada, AirTran, MidWest, US Airways and USA 3000 currently offer no special senior fare programs.

Some foreign carriers still offer seniors 10 percent off regular fares, including Austrian, Finair, Lufthansa, SAS and Swiss, said Ms. Heilman. "Cathay Pacific's 55-plus program is particularly good, a full 10 percent off for both the traveler and a traveling companion of any age."

Like Ms. Nagin, Ms. Heilman notes that the senior savings are not always the lowest available fare. "So you have to be a smart shopper."

■ **Accommodations:** This is one area where seniors are still special, Ms. Heilman said.

"Hilton's SeniorHHonors program is one of the best," she said. "Membership costs a couple \$55 for the first year and \$40 a year after that, but in addition to a rate guaranteed to be lower than any other publicly available rate, you can get a second room for the same price, as well as 20 percent off restaurant bills."

Many other hotels offer older travelers discounts of 10 percent or more. However, the discounts and age requirement vary by hotel chain, even among individual properties in a chain. Furthermore, the price break may be no more than you might get with other discount programs offered to AAA members and corporate travelers. Still, it always makes sense to ask about senior discounts, but only once you have been quoted a rate for a room.

Some of the best senior discounts are available to members of AARP, which is open to anyone 50 and older. AARP's discount accommodations program lists 28 hotel chains that will knock off up to 50 percent of the price of room, including Best Western, Comfort Inns, La Quinta, Ramada, Rodeway, Sheraton, Westin, W and Wyndham. Reservations may require advance booking of several weeks and a weekend stay, but a single discount can easily pay AARP's annual \$12.50 membership fee. In addition, AARP members often qualify for room upgrades and extra amenities.

Another organization, SeniorDiscounts, also provides hotel breaks on hundreds of hotels, as well as what it claims is the largest data base of senior discounts (125,000) anywhere. Membership is \$24, and details are available on its Web site, www.seniordiscounts.com.

■ **Automobiles:** Most major auto rental companies offer discounts of 5 percent or 10 percent to senior travelers, although their definition of senior varies from age 50 (Advantage, Alamo, Dollar, Enterprise, Hertz, National and Payless) to 55 (Avis and Thrifty). AARP members can get even larger discounts from Avis, Hertz and National.

■ **Amtrak:** Anyone 62 and older can get a 15 percent discount on most Amtrak coach fares. Seniors also get a 10 percent discount on North America Rail Passes, a great way to get around the United States and Canada.

Canada's Via Rail allows 10 percent discounts for travelers 60 and older, and even better, if one senior coach fare is purchased, the traveler can bring along a companion of any age for free.

■ **Admissions:** Senior discounts sometimes up to 50 percent still exist at movie and live theaters, museums, historic sites and other tourist attractions. And don't overlook one of the best senior admission deals: the National Park Service's Golden Age Passport. Ten dollars for anyone 62 and older buys lifetime admission to all of America's national parks as well as discounts on other park purchases.

■ **At sea:** Because so many seniors vacation on cruise ships, the companies tend to be fairly stingy on price breaks.

Still, travel agent Jody Harris, manager of Carlson Wagonlit office in Upper St. Clair, helps many of her senior clients find some discounts.

"A number of cruise lines do have promotions targeting passengers 55 and over. Celebrity has started publishing a separate column of fares for them, as well as assigning them the best cabin available at time of final payment. Royal Caribbean offers a 5 to 20 percent senior savings, while Holland America and Princess give discounts and cabin preference based on past passenger status number of cruises."

Several group tour operators, such as Collette Vacations and Globus Vacations, also offer special savings for AARP members. Beyond these price breaks, senior travelers often have advantages that younger people do not, as local actress Barbara Russell and her friend Ed Grentz of the North Side have discovered.

"We only travel places in the off-season," she said. "That way, we get great prices both on air fares and accommodations. On a recent trip to Sicily, we flew round trip from Pittsburgh to Rome for \$460, and stayed in a great little B&B for 42 euros [\$50] a night."

That freedom to schedule trips midweek or during off-peak periods, as well as the flexibility to respond to last-minute deals, can provide the biggest senior savings of all.

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