

Saving on Vacations When Times Are Uncertain

If you've known me awhile you know I am a big believer in vacations – and a dedicated vacation bucket.

Here are some things to think about as you do your vacation planning this year.

Weigh the value of driving vs. flying: Driving is not always the best option. Check your per mile costs. When I calculated the cost of a day trip to Trader Joe's near Rochester recently I discovered that with my car's gas mileage and wear and tear on the vehicle (usually 10 cents or so a mile) the 160 mile round trip cost me \$28.19 for the gas and another \$16 in wear and tear. Not that I would fly to Rochester but it does give one pause in planning a longer trip.

Know when to use travel agents

Go for the package deal.

Plan online Consider travel insurance.

Check on car insurance

Check telecommunications options

Travel safe

Prevent theft at home

Share these money-saving vacation tips with cost-minded clients to help them take their trip without overspending. And don't forget to use them when planning your own vacation, as well.

With everyone watching spending these days, a vacation can be first up on the chopping block. But if your clients, or you, are thinking of foregoing a vacation in favor of saving the money, remember that vacations can be particularly valuable stress relievers during a tough economy. Help your clients (or yourself) to shop smart and make small adjustments in their spending on the trip, and they can decompress without worrying about money too much. Here are some cost-saving ideas:

Weigh the value of driving vs. flying. Encourage your clients to check where gasoline prices are before they leave—driving vacations may not be the cheapest alternative. If they haven't measured the gas mileage lately on their car, they should do so after their next fill-up and see what it would really cost them to drive to their desired destination. And don't let them forget about wear and tear on the car (roughly 10 to 20 cents a mile), meals, or hotels on the road. If they plan significantly ahead of time, traveling by air might get them there not only faster but cheaper. At the same time, if they fly and need a rental car, don't forget to figure in that cost.

Plan online. Calling hotels and airlines to make reservations will not only get clients put on hold, it's also likely to cost them more money. If clients are not regular users of the Internet, they should know that airlines and hotels particularly have migrated more of their deals for rooms and meals to their websites, because visitors can complete the whole reservation process themselves. That saves airlines, hotels, and rental car companies

considerable labor cost. Also, if they're flexible, they can check travel sites that offer last-minute deals and travel that way.

Go for the package deal. Online travel sites make it easy to combine hotel, airfare, and rental car at a cheaper rate. And remember the days and times that are typically cheaper to fly: Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays if they're willing to fly early in the morning or late in the evening. Also, if the package deal is good enough, they may opt to keep the flight and rental car components while checking at the last minute with a hotel they'd rather stay at to see if they can get a rock-bottom rate that might make trading up worth their while.

Know when to use travel agents. A good travel agent can be a great money saver, particularly for lengthy or complex trips. It's OK for clients to compare prices themselves, but they may want to consult a travel agent if they are going to remote destinations—the agent will know the territory, and if they have to make changes, they might be able to help them do so without paying a lot of extra money. Also, clients shouldn't forget to check currency rates.

Check telecommunications options. Suggest that clients check with their wireless company to make sure their phones will work where they're going. That's particularly relevant if they're going overseas. Also find out what the potential costs will be for roaming charges, which can quickly skyrocket. They might go online to see if their overseas airport rents cell phones at a daily or weekly charge, or if it might be worth using a disposable phone they can buy when they get there.

Check on car insurance. For domestic trips, clients should double check whether their own car insurance policy is likely to pick up the bill if they crash their rental car. For overseas trips, tell them to check with their rental agencies as well as their credit card company to see what insurance options they have. They shouldn't think only in terms of accidents, but about blown transmissions in small towns with only one mechanic who doesn't speak English. Also, if they're driving to Canada or Latin America in their own car, they need to be very sure they have adequate coverage required in every country. They might have to buy supplemental coverage.

Consider travel insurance. There is insurance coverage available for travelers who face sudden cancellations as well as medical needs. Trip cancellation can reimburse clients for non-refundable costs in the event of things like an illness for them or a family member that causes them to cancel their trip. Look into what their current health insurance covers at their destination, so that they can understand their risk exposure and weigh it against the cost of supplemental insurance. It's important to realize that health insurance issues crop up on domestic trips as well as those overseas—for instance, your client's health insurer may not cover claims in other parts of the country. Always check. Also, if they're on a business trip, make sure their company health plan will cover them in an emergency.

Prevent theft at home and abroad. Tell clients to photocopy their driver's license and passport and keep the originals with their valuables in the hotel safe. Also, don't forget to tell them to hold their mail and pay all their bills before leaving town.