

PRACTICAL TRAVELER

Traveling Off-Season, in Summer

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

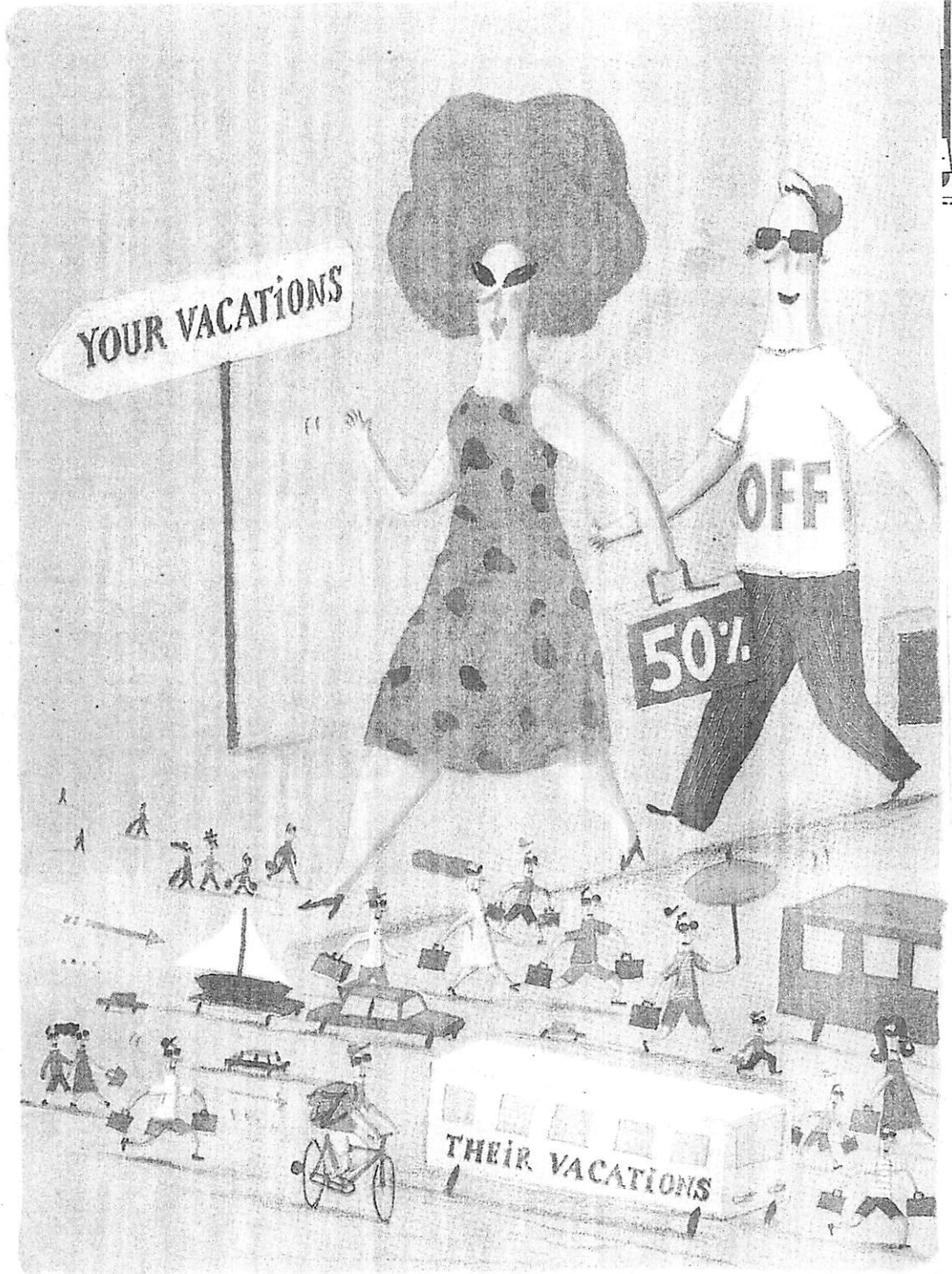
WANT to save on vacation this summer? While everyone is rushing to the beach or crowding into campgrounds, try heading in the other direction.

As American travel budgets are challenged by high fuel costs and the weak dollar, so-called off-season destinations like mountain towns, desert resorts and Caribbean islands offer a tantalizing alternative to the summer hot spots: fewer crowds, wide availability and hotel rates that can be as much as 50 percent off.

Sure, there can be drawbacks to visiting in the off-season. Travelers may find that some resorts are under construction, restaurants or stores are closed and staffing may not be quite as robust as it is during the high season. It can also be insufferably hot, depending on the destination. But there are plenty of ways to stay cool, whether with icy cocktails by the pool or air-conditioned spas and casinos. Below, some options.

ARUBA Roughly 15 miles off the coast of Venezuela, Aruba, like Bonaire, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago, sits along the southern fringe of the hurricane belt, making it less prone to major storms. Aruba receives roughly 16 inches of rain a year, with summer temperatures in the mid- to high 80s. But nearly constant trade winds help keep sun worshippers cool.

Hotels offer rates 30 to 40 percent off normal prices during the summer, according to the Aruba Hotel and Tourism Association, and roll out special promotions to help fill rooms. The Westin Resort & Casino, for example, has rates from \$189 a night compared with \$329 in the winter. And budget-conscious travelers can easily figure out their total vacation cost by staying at one of sev-



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island. Divi Resorts, with three all-inclusive properties on Aruba, for example, is offering rates as low as \$139 a night — a saving of up to 30 percent — and free meals for children 12 and under.

LAS VEGAS Summer in Sin City is a big pool party, with resorts offering what amount to over-the-top outdoor clubs. Think velvet ropes, V.I.P. cabanas, bass-pumping D.J.'s, chilled towels, and lots of skin. A few, including Bare at the Mirage and Moorea at Mandalay Bay, are even top-optional.

The newest addition to the pool party scene, Tropicana Hotel's Nikki Beach, a recreational complex spread across two acres, offers outdoor gambling, a restaurant, outdoor cafe and bar and premium bottle service. Last month, the 22,000-square-foot Marquee Dayclub, on the roof deck of the Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas, opened with a birthday party for Alessandra Ambrosio, the Victoria's Secret model. It features 2 swimming pools, 8 cabanas and 10 three-level bungalows.

Expect significant savings on accommodations in the hot summer months, where the average high in July is 104 degrees, and hotels like the Imperial Palace offer nightly rates as low as \$25, according to Vegas.com. Prices at more upscale accommodations like Caesars Palace or Trump International can be as low as \$80 a night. And there are plenty of air-conditioned casinos, restaurants and spas if you need a break from the scorching desert sun.

WINTER PARK, COLO. Want a cheap vacation without the heat? Mountain towns normally associated with skiing are perfect for outdoor enthusiasts or those who would rather relax on a porch in the evening with a good glass of wine than hang out on a beach. Winter Park Resort, roughly 90 miles from Denver International Airport, offers activities including one of Colorado's longest Alpine slides, a zip line for children, mini-golf and chairlift-accessible mountain bike terrain. Special family events include outdoor movies Friday evenings from July 1 through Labor Day weekend and "Cirque du Saturdays," with troubadours, unicyclists, stilt walkers and jugglers performing at the base of the mountain on Saturdays from July 2 to Aug. 20.

Lodging is significantly cheaper than during ski season. Four nights in a two-bedroom at the Beaver Village Condominiums is \$534 in June or July at summermountaintravel.com, Ski.com's summer Web site. The same package goes for \$1,190 in April and \$4,003 during winter holidays.

ST. PETERSBURG, FLA. Travelers have long turned to St. Pete as a cheaper spring break alternative. During the summer, budget-friendly hotels lower prices by another 10 percent, bringing starting rates to \$99 at the surfer-chic Postcard Inn on the Beach and \$104 at the downtown Renaissance Vinoy. This year, the city is also running a promotion centered on a 100-day calendar

(May 29 to Sept. 5) of events to help drum up business, including its annual Sunrise Sale (July 21) where shoppers are treated to deep discounts if they show up before noon in their pajamas.

For art buffs, the city has the \$36-million Dali Museum, which opened in January and houses the largest collection of Dali works outside Spain. And a water park, Splash Island, has opened off the coast of TradeWinds Island Grand resort, with inflatable slides, trampolines and chill-out loungers.

St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport is served by several budget carriers including Allegiant Air, Frontier and Vision airlines. Travelers can also fly into Tampa, about 30 miles away, where JetBlue, Delta and others have been offering round-trip flights from New York for as low as \$230, based on a recent online search.

NEW ORLEANS Visitors to the Crescent City surged to 8.3 million last year, up 10.7 percent from 2009 — the highest since Hurricane Katrina struck six years ago. Bargains have been harder to come by during events like Mardi Gras, but prices drop as the temperature rises, with July and August typically the muggiest and cheapest months.

Hotel New Orleans offers rates as low as \$69 a night July 5 to Sept. 19, including breakfast and Wi-Fi. The InterContinental New Orleans has rates from \$99, down from \$189 to \$239 in spring. The New Orleans Marriott has rates from \$89, and guests who stay

four nights or more between May 22 and Oct. 22 will receive \$30 off each night booked, 20 percent off meals and drinks and a booklet with \$500 in discounts to local restaurants and attractions.

There are now more than 1,180 restaurants compared with some 800 before Hurricane Katrina, and in August, many participate in the Coolinary New Orleans program, offering prix fixe three-course meals. Free events, like the Satchmo SummerFest, with music, parades and a birthday party for Louis Armstrong running from Aug. 4 to 7, add to the fun, but not to expenses.

SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ. Summer rates are often half off peak-season spring rates as hotel occupancy drops to about 50 percent, according to the convention and visitors bureau.

To stir up business, resorts offer programs like free tequila tastings, astronomer-led stargazing (Four Seasons Resort) and movies at the pool (the Phoenician). Golf courses also get in on the discounts with rates that allow you to play the course all day, as much as you want for one low fee. You might want to restrict your golfing to the mornings and early evenings though; temperatures can get as high as 104 degrees in the afternoon.

While there is no getting around the fact that summer in the Sonoran Desert is hot, cooler evening temperatures lead adventure companies to offer evening programs. Stellar Adventures, for example, offers Night Vision tours from \$145 a person from April to October. ■

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