Get Outta Here!

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The chaos of the holidays, busy days—and nights—at work, and midwinter blues add up to one thing: You need a vacation! When you realize that you need to escape for a couple of days, you may not want to wait the requisite seven to ten days to get a good deal on airline tickets and vacation packages. The web sites featured below specialize in getting you out of town on short notice.

LAST-MINUTE GOLD MINES

Named for the 59th minute, Site59 (www.site59.com) has a network of more than 2,100 suppliers to offer you some of the very best last-minute vacation packages available. However, Site59 only offers packages from 33 departure cities. If you do not happen to live in one of those cities, you are out of luck. The vacation packages at Site59 always include airfare and lodging. Packages may also include extras such as rental car, admission to special events, and more.

Site59’s content and technology power the last-minute sections of Travelocity, Orbitz, Yahoo!Travel, aavacations.com, northwest’s nwa.com, bestfares.com, concierge.com, and lowestfare.com. So, if you are using one of these web sites’ last-minute sections, you can be rest assured that you have all of the other web sites covered.

11th Hour Vacations (www.11thhourvacations.com) is a constantly updated catalog of vacations for people who can travel on short notice to take advantage of unsold industry inventory. In many cases, you can take off on a high-quality tour or cruise for as much as 70 percent under market price—if you can leave within 30 to 45 days.

This web site allows travelers to review and choose from a selection of significant discounts on vacation packages and cruises to various destinations. In addition, the 11th Hour Vacations web site features more departure cities than Site59. If you want immediate notification of vacation possibilities, you can register your personal preferences and receive an automatic and customized e-mail notification whenever a matching travel opportunity becomes available.

LastMinuteTravel.com (www.lastminutetravel.com) features both airfare-only offers and vacation packages. I was amazed at the number of discount airfares available from the airport nearest my hometown—which is not serviced by a major international airport.

LastMinuteTravel.com allows you to search for travel discounts in several categories. For example, you can check out special airfare offers from a variety of airlines. You can also browse discount offers for hotel rooms, vacation packages, cruises, and rental cars. After you have made your travel plans, you can check out LastMinuteTravel.com’s Event section to find out about discounts available for events being held at your destination.

If you have an American Express card, check out American Express Travel (http://travel.americanexpress.com/travel). Of course, you can take advantage of many of the American Express travel specials even if you do not have an American Express card, but discounts are even deeper for cardholders. You can browse through last-minute travel specials at American Express (http://travel.americanexpress.com/travel/lmt) by destination; travel type such as cruise, weekend getaway, or all-inclusive vacation packages; and activity or interest such as adventure, golf, or honeymoon. American Express contracts with some high-profile travel providers. For example, at American Express travel, you can find last-minute specials by providers such as Abercrombie and Kent, Walt Disney Vacations, and the Canyon Ranch Resort and Spa.

A WORD OF WARNING

If you purchase a last-minute vacation over the Internet, make sure you understand what the package includes before you submit your credit card number. Some packages offer all-inclusive vacations including airfare, lodging, food, car rental, and admission to local attractions. Other packages include only airfare and lodging. Some package price quotes include all taxes and gratuities, and others may tack on service charges, shipping and handling of tickets, as well as taxes and gratuities.

Following this cardinal rule will ensure that you know what you are paying for: Read the fine print and get everything in writing. You should print out not only your confirmation but also those web pages that explain the package details.

A LITTLE MORE LEAD TIME

If you need more flexibility in your travel planning, check out Orbitz (www.orbitz.com). This web site was developed by the major U.S. airlines to provide a one-stop shop for airfares. Orbitz searches more than 450 airlines to provide you with the most low-fare options for your chosen destination. Orbitz also features great values on rental cars and hotel rooms.

Orbitz offers a customer care feature. By signing up for Traveler Alerts, Orbitz stays in touch throughout the travel process. You will receive alerts about weather delays or gate changes. You will also receive an e-mail message with local destination information and automated confirmations 48 hours and 3 hours before departure.

CONCLUSION

Although world events may make you hesitant to leave home, you can find some great reasons to travel. Whether you are visiting family or friends or are just planning to get away from it all, you can use the Internet to find some great deals.