

## Warm and affordable spring travel destinations

By Stephanie Citron

Have the frigid temps, perpetually grey skies and road-salt encrusted snowboots squelched your spontaneity? No doubt your social landscape has gotten old from the cold; maybe you and your friends can consider a change of scenery to a spot where you can trade in those cumbersome UGGs for featherweight flip-flops. So, you've been a slacker letting January and February

slide past and with them, great deals at those half-empty beach resorts. Now March has arrived without a hint of warmth, and you're itching to kick start springtime.

Sadly, those sun-dazzled destinations seem to be filled up with families and college students who had good fortune of planning ahead. Clearly by now, the pickings are slim and the prices exorbitant. The good news is that we feel your shivering pain, and happily, have uncovered (sh-h) a few deals just waiting to be found.

What qualifies as good deal? First, it's in a tried-and-true destination that offers quality accommodations, appealing food choices and an array of activities. Flying nonstop from BWI is key, ensuring that you don't waste precious vacation time trying to get there, and also lessens the chance of wayward baggage. "Try to be as flexible as possible," suggests Lyndsay Roach of Liberty Travel, an agency known for providing well-priced package deals to tropical resorts. "The traditional spring breaker is on the school's vacation schedule, so you can score [better rates] by being able to book a Tuesday or Wednesday departure". She also recommends being open to different destinations. If flights to Punta Cana are sold out, perhaps consider The Bahamas, which has similar weather and equally beautiful beaches.

Albeit, for most people, price is what makes or breaks the deal. So where to begin the search? Most vacation deal-hunters, especially the tech-savvy 20-something crowd, turn to Internet sites dedicated to promoting vacation packages, such as Travel Zoo, cheapcaribbean.com and Apple Vacations. If you do, seasoned travel professionals advise to look for a telephone number connecting you to a live person who is accountable to answer questions and ensure that you actually getting the deal you think you are.

"The airfare drives pricing [of vacation packages] and that is always a moving target. Most people don't understand that those [discounted seats] are limited, and most often, an hour after it hits the web – or the newspaper-they're gone", says Libby Gunnett owner of Tradewinds Travel in West Friendship, Maryland. Gunnett cautions vacation seekers to make certain that the package includes everything you will have to eventually pay for, including "transfers, resort fees and taxes that otherwise may appear after the fact." She also says that many of these heavily discounted deals include the least desirable rooms and warns destination promotional photos can be deceiving, referring to the Travel Channel's expose on Hotel Fake Out Photos. "A travel agent will have the contacts to confirm that the property is as it is advertised, and that there are no impacting surprises, like construction or damage from a storm".

Conversely, cruises most often provide the biggest bang for the buck, and waiting until the last minute can actually earn you a better rate because the cruise liner is desperate to fill the rooms. "Cruises are a very good value", says Gunnett, "but realize when booking them online that you are on your own to find good airfare, and that you will be paying separately for soda, alcohol and there are sometimes up charges for the finer restaurants onboard."

So, now you're properly armed with all of the information you'll need to find a dazzling vacation deal. Are you ready to go – like, right now? The deals we found below are indeed fabulous, but fleeting, so you'll need to book quickly.

