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Bit of planning can result in affordable summer vacations

By Eileen Alt Powell AP Business Writer - 06/17/2006

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- ▶ NEW YORK — Higher gasoline costs and steeper rates at hotels and motels may have some families worried that they won't be able to take a vacation trip this year. But experts say there are affordable alternatives — and many of them are close to home.

Vacation costs are indeed rising. The price of regular, unleaded gasoline currently averages about \$2.90 a gallon, 36 percent higher than the average of \$2.13 last summer, according to the latest figures from the AAA motorists' club. AAA also found in its annual holiday survey that a family of two adults and two children can expect to pay an average of \$261 per day for food and lodging, up more than 5 percent from \$247 last year.

Geoff Sundstrom, a spokesman for AAA, headquartered in Heathrow, Fla., said consumers who want to hold down costs will benefit from comparison shopping.

"Get on the Internet and look for discounts ... or evaluate and compare properties and their pricing," he said.

For example, families can lower the expense of visiting a theme park in several ways — by purchasing discount tickets in advance over the Internet, by downloading coupons that can be redeemed at the gate or by using memberships in associations such as AAA or AARP to get discounts at the facility.

Diane McCurdy, a financial planner in Bakersfield, Calif., said families should remember the important thing about vacations is taking a break.

"It's important to take the time, but that doesn't have to mean you're going to an expensive spa," she said. "There are ways to recharge without breaking the bank."

McCurdy, the author of "How Much is Enough? Balancing Today's Needs with Tomorrow's Retirement Goals," said the most obvious thing families can do is explore their hometowns — or nearby cities — as if they were tourists.

Check out the museums and art galleries, she suggests. Find out what's free during the summer, like tours through landmark or historical districts. Go to the zoo.

"It's good to get the whole family involved in planning the activities," McCurdy said. "It gets everyone excited, and it's part of the fun."

Families also can consider hiking and camping in nearby state and national parks, she added.

"For most kids it doesn't matter if you're an hour from home or 10 hours from home," she said. "It's about the experience."

Troy Corley, who publishes guidebooks such as "Free L.A. — The Ultimate Free Fun Guide to the City of Angels," said she has often found low cost or no cost vacation activities close to home.

Start at the public library, she advises. Besides lending out books and DVDs, libraries often have free summer reading programs for kids as well as special programs for adults, such as classes on how to write memoirs or how to research your family history.

Next, check out the summer schedule of the local department of parks and recreation for nature programs, hikes and even storytelling around a campfire. A city's convention and visitors' bureau should have a list of local festivals and other special events, she added.

Corley, the mother of two teenagers, also is an advocate of taking out memberships in local institutions.

"If your kid or family enjoys the zoo or a particular museum, become a member," she said. "It will almost pay for itself on your first visit. And you can visit everyday that it's open for the entire year."

In addition, many cultural institutions have reciprocal programs with other institutions so the member of a museum in one city gets free admission at museums in other cities, she said.

"For example, I belong to the L.A. zoo," she said. "When I visit grandma this year, in Florida, I can visit the Florida zoo for free."

There also are companies like CityPass that offer booklets of passes at discount prices for major tourist sites in big cities, such as New York, Boston and Chicago.

Corley said that families should never forget to ask about discounts everywhere they go.

"There are student discounts, senior discounts, sometimes military or veterans discounts," she said. She added that some sites, like theme parks, may have special summer deals with particular credit card companies.

— — — On the Net: American Automobile Association: <http://www.aaa.com>
McCurdy's site: <http://www.how-much-is-enough.com> Corley's site:
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