

Travel Scene



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crossroads
Iris Jones

'Tis the season to be cruising

If cruising is on your list of dream vacations, this may be your year. Winter is a high season for northerners who want to flee the snow and enjoy the sun, but summer is still peak travel season for Americans, especially families, and cruising is part of that.

Travel bookings for every destination have been soft because of Desert Storm, and soft bookings encourage discounts. Bookings are picking up, but cruise ships all over the world are still eager for passengers.

On top of that, cruise ships that normally sail the Mediterranean in summer have repositioned themselves to North America this year. You will find them in the Caribbean, on the Alaska runs and even in the new and growing New England market.

Cruise ships have always had discounts for people who book early, but they have extended their early-booking discounts this year. You might have to hurry, because many have extended only until April 1, but there are others that will be cutting cruise rates for a much longer time.

Where to go? Hawaii almost never offers cruise discounts. Alaska is a fairly expensive market, and the early-booking discount is only about 5 percent. But there is a new wrinkle in the Alaska market. Several of the European ships have repositioned some of their sailings to Alaska this year.

Paula Succi, cruise manager of Only By Sea Inc., in Birmingham, says Holland America is still offering \$350 per couple off their sailings book by April 1. Regency has extended its early-booking discounts to 90 days before sailing, which means you can book in May and sail in August.

"You can book an Alaskan cruise for as little as \$1,700 per person, including airfare, but \$2,000 and up is more realistic," Paula said. "Regency is a good example. It's a casual ship. At their early booking rate, you can sail for \$1,300 plus \$475 per person for airfare to Vancouver, British Columbia and home from Anchorage, Alaska."

Paula highly recommends cruises to Bermuda this year. You can sail for \$1,100 out of New York. I sailed the Horizon to Bermuda last summer and highly recommend that. Bermuda is very expensive, but one of these week-long cruises gives you a day and half of sailing time, coming and going, as well as four days in Bermuda with your ship as hotel.

The best deals are still in the Caribbean. The upscale Renaissance Cruise Lines has repositioned to the Caribbean this summer. Buy one passage and the second person in the cabin is free.

The midsize Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines offer 50 percent off an air-sea package for the second person. Buy your own air and the second person costs \$199 for the cruise.

Budget-priced Regency Lines offers 50 percent off an air-sea package for the second person in the room. Buy your own air and the second person cruises free!

You won't find many bargains on New England cruises, which are mostly fall cruises. Paula says most people in Michigan are used to changing fall colors so they don't book fall color cruises as eagerly as southerners do.

What about the kids? Try a three- or four-day cruise on Premier, Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian Cruise Lines, etc. You can't beat Premier, because of its ties with Walt Disney World. And Premier has a single-parent plan applicable to some but not all cabin categories. Single parents can bring a child under age 17 for the much lower rate usually paid by the third and fourth persons in the room.

Remember: It doesn't cost you a penny to talk to a travel agent or to book through a travel agent. The travel industry pays their commission.

Frankly Scarlett... Taste the Old South in Mississippi mansions

By Phyllis Kroger Stillman
special writer

"Gone with the Wind" created beautiful and selective images of antebellum plantation life: An elegant home reflecting opulence and plenty. A lifestyle characterized by chivalry and the southern belle. Mint juleps on the veranda. As for the slavery that made it all possible, well, we'll think about that tomorrow.

A number of antebellum plantations along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge have been restored as elegant bed and breakfasts where you can spend the night steeped in the history and reliving the romance. Guests are usually housed in outbuildings, but a few have rooms in the "big house."

Madewood
When I first arrived at Madewood, I thought I had made a mistake. There was no paved parking lot, no guide in antebellum dress, and the entry way looked, frankly, a little seedy. But Madewood turned out to be my favorite of all the plantations I visited. It feels like a home, not a hotel. It may be the closest we'll get to experiencing life on a 19th century plantation.

Overnight visitors to Madewood are treated like friends of the family, welcome to explore the home with its beautiful antiques and impressive art work, and actually use the rooms. Nothing is roped off.

Guests have the run of the grounds, including a quiet and peaceful family cemetery, shaded by a massive oak tree, with graves dating back to the 1820s.

An overnight stay begins in the library, with fruit, cheese, wine and conversation with other guests. It's at dinner, served by candlelight in the main dining room, when the romance really begins. In the flickering candlelight, with one of the guests acting as the master of the house with a small bell to summon the staff, the years melt away and you become part of history.

The food is fabulous. Dinner is a home-cooked, four-course meal



IRIS SANDERSON JONES

This is the Madewood mansion on Bayou La Fourche near Baton Rouge, La. Guests here have the run of the grounds, including a quiet and peaceful family cemetery, shaded by a massive oak

featuring regional specialties like gumbo, sweet potatoes, southern-style vegetables, seafood pie and bread pudding with whiskey sauce. After dinner, coffee and brandy are served in the parlor.

In the morning, guests are awakened with fresh coffee and juice in their rooms, followed by a continental breakfast (most often including homemade biscuits and jam).

The mansion is a Greek revival style with six supporting columns in front and long porches on the second floor, front and back. It was designed by architect Henry Howard with 365 windows and doors, one for each day of the year. And it is beautiful, so beautiful that it was used in the TV movie "A Woman Called Moses."

There are four bedrooms and a suite available in the main mansion for overnight guests. Some bedrooms have bathrooms within, others have private baths down the hall. (None of the rooms have telephone or televi-

sion, but TVs are available if you ask.) Rooms in the main mansion are \$159 per couple per night and include the aforementioned amenities, plus a guided tour of the mansion. Other accommodations are available.

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Set a spell

Virginia towns are wonderful places to leave hubbub behind

reader's report

Editor's note: Betsy Taylor of Birmingham learned fishing from her father and antique collecting from her mother. She doesn't go fishing as often as she likes, but is very involved with antiques.

She is a member of the steering committee for the Birmingham Antiques Festival, which previews 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Thursday April 11, and will be in operation 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday April 12 and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday April 13 at the Community House in Birmingham.

Her love of antiques also takes her traveling. She recently escorted a group of antique lovers to Leesburg, Va., and then

By Betsy Taylor
special writer

We approached historic Leesburg through a maze of fast-food chains, but disappointment disappeared when we viewed the heart of the town. Chartered in 1757, it

still boasts some original buildings as well as old brick walks.

Leesburg has many good inns and bed-and-breakfasts, but I prefer to stay at The Norris House Inn. My prejudice may well stem from the fact that my daughter Libby is the innkeeper! But the inn is charming.

Built in 1806, it has been lovingly restored by owner Amy Deffenner to the 1850-80s style it had while occupied by the Norris brothers, famous Virginia builders and craftsmen. The restoration is most evident in the library where guests gather by the fire to read, sip tea, or talk. The bookcases, furniture, and pale yellow walls create a cozy setting. The bedrooms are well appointed, but guests should expect to

share a bathroom. Three of the bedrooms have fireplaces, so I like to arrive Friday evening after dinner, unpack, and begin my relaxing weekend by curling up with a treasured book by the fire.

Guests are left pretty much to their own, but do gather for a home-style breakfast in the well-proportioned dining room. A typical breakfast includes fresh fruit, juices, homemade muffins, quiche, sausage, toast and endless pots of coffee laced with cinnamon. This ample breakfast is included in the \$68 to \$112 a night charge. The Norris House Inn is at 108 Loudon St. SW, Leesburg, VA 22075, (703) 777-1805.

A needlework sign at the inn reads "George Washington slept next door." The adjacent stone house is called Washington's Headquarters, because it is believed that Washington quartered here during the French and Indian War.

Saturday we explored Leesburg. The town has an understated look so sweaters, slacks and comfortable shoes are right for a country weekend. Shops are set in wonderful old brick or stone houses built in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

At the foot of the hill stands my favorite shop, The Guest Room, Ltd., owned and operated by Pat Ewalt, who left horse raising to open a shop full of old faces and quilts. It is Mecca to the horse set who flood the town during hunting season.

The nearby town of Middleburg, a weekend retreat for government leaders, is smaller and has all the shops centered on one road. Stop at the B and A Grocery for a chat with Mrs. Edwards who has been in business for 57 years. She says 800 people live in Middleburg plus a lot of folks who walk around on the weekends. Buy her chutney, and damson jam, or order

Reader has handy tips on Alaska and Florida

Editor's note: Reader Edna Alexander "was well intrigued" with the stories on Key West and Alaska that appeared on these pages March 7. She has traveled extensively in both places and would like to offer the following tips to other tourists.

By Edna Alexander
special writer
ALASKA

Very rarely in any travel plans do I see or hear the "Top of the World Highway" mentioned. It runs from Dawson in the Yukon to Tok, Alaska.

The high-country scenery is fantastic, but traveling it requires good driving and care. Dawson is special too, in that so much of the gold mine equipment remains where it was left when mining operations ceased.

In the Kenebec in lower Alaska is the Russian River. In June, thousands of fishermen line the banks to catch high salmon. What a sight!

Alaska visitors don't have to ride expensive cruise ships to enjoy themselves. In June and July of 1988, six of us traveled just about every major road in Alaska in a new Ford van with pop-up camper.

We ate well, enjoyed a lot of salmon lakes, the University of Alaska and seeing glaciers by boat. Total cost per couple for 60 days was just under \$3,000. We drove the entire Alaska highway on the way north, and returned by the state ferries from Haines, with stops of several days at Juneau and Ketchikan, coming ashore at Prince Rupert.

That was our third and best trip to Alaska. Most people just get to the "front door" of Alaska with the cruise ships. However, additional Canadian taxes have driven up the cost of time spent in that country.

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Birmingham resident Betsy Taylor (at left) stands with daughter Libby in front of The Norris House Inn in Leesburg, Va. Libby is the

Norris innkeeper, but mom stays there because it's a wonderful place.

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