

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

Price tag is lower, crowds are thinner in September, October

By SHARON FLESHER
Special to the Record-Eagle

The crowds are lighter, the weather is still pleasant, and accommodations are more affordable.

For vacationers who visit northern Michigan after Labor Day, deals abound. Since tourism drops substantially once school schedules resume and put a crimp on family travel, hotels and resorts offer many discount packages to tempt the remaining vacationers — mostly seniors, couples and golfers.

Most hotels and resorts offer some version of a fall discount package, creating a variety of options for travelers. Sometimes the package is a direct rate discount; others might throw in free golf or casino vouchers.

At northern Michigan's most famed resort, the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, guests may choose between a three-night stay with a fourth night free or a two-night stay with a third night at half price. The offer, which includes full breakfast and a five-course dinner daily, is valid during selected dates — mostly weeknights — during September.

Other Mackinac Island hotels offer discounted rates on selected dates, mostly mid-week, during the fall season. At the Lakeview Hotel, for example, the \$64.95 per person nightly rate includes discounts on meals.

In the Gaylord area, the big fall attraction is golf. Most courses reduce rates, combine greens fees with lodging packages or offer enticements such as unlimited golf.

Marsh Ridge, for example, begins "Thermometer Golf" Oct. 1. The greens fee for two players is equal to the temperature when the golfers arrive, with the maximum fee set at \$60 for two with a cart.

Golfers may choose from two mid-week packages at Hidden Valley in Gaylord: one night's lodging plus 18 holes is \$55, two nights' lodging plus 54 holes is \$135.

Weekend rates generally are higher at most resorts. At Shanty Creek near Bellaire, the mid-week package rate is \$67 per person; weekends are \$99 per person. Both packages include accommodations, breakfast, fitness center entry, day care, shuttle service and a choice of 18 holes of golf or dinner.

Non-golfers have plenty of choices, too. For example, the Bayshore Resort in Traverse City offers a Romance Package, which includes lodging, fresh flowers, champagne and chocolate, souvenir champagne glasses, a continental breakfast and a spa basket. Gamblers may opt for the casino package, which includes lodging, breakfast and a \$50 voucher at the Leelanau Sands Casino. Rates for both packages depend on type of room and date.



Bayshore Resort photo

Most of the region's resorts and hotels offer discounts and packages for fall visitors. For example, the Bayshore Resort in Traverse City offers a Romance Package that includes champagne, flowers and chocolates.

Some hotels use themes to attract guests on certain weekends. Petoskey's Terrace Inn fea-

tures a Square Dance weekend and a Halloween weekend. The Birchwood Inn in Harbor

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Diane Dakins

Springs offers a lodging package with a fall shoreline bicycling tour.

Fall color weekends are so popular that rates at many hotels and resorts are comparable to peak summer season rates during those dates, usually late September through mid-October in northern lower Michigan.

"Tourism will definitely drop off after Labor Day," said Diane Dakins of the Petoskey Area Visitors Bureau. "But the last two weeks of September and the first two weeks of October, it's right back up there."

However, midweek rates offer value, especially for seniors who have flexible travel schedules. Color tours are especially popular with that market, too, area tourism officers said.

"The senior market is a very crucial part of our fall business, not only because they can travel in the fall, but because the rates go down, they tend to travel in the fall," Dakins said.

Senior coach tours during color season are big business, said Charlie Whinnham of the Traverse City Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"That's who we're strong with in the fall," he said.

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