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## Are Travel Specials Really Specials?

By Pete Peterson  
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It is difficult to explain to the public how prices for cruises and tours are determined because many varying factors impact prices, causing them to fluctuate all the time. Since I deal mainly with cruises, I will use them as an example, but the same principle applies to other packages as well.

When a cruise line sets the initial cruise price, usually about 12 to 18 months before the cruise departs, they are estimating their cost, expected revenue, and expenses based on what they think the market will bear, how many people will travel, and how inflation will affect everything. Ships use enormous quantities of fuel, order massive supplies of food, and pay huge amounts in fees and taxes, all of which vary in price and affect the cost of operation.

Prices are also affected by the old rule of supply and demand. If a particular cruise is popular, the cruise line may raise the fare to capitalize. Conversely, if a cruise is not selling as fast as expected, the cruise line may lower the price or offer specials.

Sometimes, major travel consortiums will reserve large numbers of cabins. They are speculating it will be a popular cruise and they can make lots of money when the ship appears to be full and they have the only available cabins. This also creates a false appearance of how well the cruise is selling, which causes prices to remain high. If they don't sell their allotment, then they have to unload the cabins back into the general market and this causes the prices to drop because there is now an abundance of available space that needs to be sold quickly.

Usually, specials are short term and a good travel agent will monitor the rates to ensure they get the best fares possible for their clients. Even after the client has made final payment, the agent can sometimes get the rate lowered and obtain a refund.

Often, specials are marketed only to a certain group, such as Resident Specials (for residents of certain States), Senior Specials, or past passenger specials.

Keep in mind that whenever school is out, families are traveling so demand and prices go up. The most expensive times are early summer, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and of course, spring break. You'll see a very limited number of specials during these times. The best time for specials and low rates are September, any time before or after holidays, and winter.

When shopping for specials, you have to ensure you read All the fine print. If you are traveling on a tight budget, the "specials" aren't necessarily the best deals for you.

Just the other day I got an e-mail from an Internet company advertising "Free Airfare" when you purchase a 10-day cruise for \$958. As with most specials, I know this is a "lead-in" rate just to get your attention and the final price will be much higher. I went to their Web site and found their 'special' was a bit misleading. Yes, the price was \$958 per person. However, when I looked at the total price, they added the required port fees and taxes, but there was also a \$199 "administrative" fee. Out of curiosity, I checked the specials I had received from this particular cruise line and found they were offering a \$199 airfare add-on. So the Internet company was misleading their customers – instead of putting the truth and saying you could get a \$958 cruise and a reduced airfare of \$199, they were advertising a cruise with free airfare for \$958 and then adding in the cost of the airfare as a separate fee to the final price and calling it something else.

You'll see some specials that offer a 'free upgrade.' But the upgrade is only available if you buy a higher price cabin, making the special not much of a special. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of specials out there, but you need to do your research.

Also, be aware that some advertised rates will include all fees and taxes, while others may include only some or none of the extra costs, as in the case above with "Free Airfare." Just make sure you get all the information, read all the fine print, and get the total out-of-pocket cost so you can make an informed decision.

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Remember. The so-called “specials” are not necessarily the best deals. Like your mother always told you, “If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is!”

The next question is: how should you book your vacation? I’ll cover that in the next article.

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