

Early bird demand returns as consumers recognise the best deals



Early bird deals are making a comeback as tour companies, airlines and other partners prove to consumers that they can provide the best value.

By Lee Mylne

SMART frequent travellers are creating strong growth in the early bird market in a new-found recognition that these are the best deals of the year, according to wholesalers.

With a strong Australian dollar driving sales – particularly to the US and Europe – travellers are still looking for the best bargains and are looking to early bird offers to provide them.

Emirates sales manager for Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory, Dean Cleaver, says consumers now know that early bird deals come out at around the same

time each year and are looking out for them.

“We have been offering early birds for a number of years now, and the smart and savvy consumers who travel annually or bi-annually know to wait and that this is when they will get the best value for money of the year,” he said.

While the airline usually offers its early bird specials from September to November for travel from February to the end of October the following year, last year it brought sales forward from April – and in doing so Cleaver says “we captured even more travellers”.

He said although 2009 was a tough year for the travel industry, there was

still growth – and that has been built on again in 2010.

Emirates offers early bird fares from Australia to 25 European destinations, South Africa and a limited number of Middle Eastern ports, with fares this year as low as \$1743 return from Melbourne to one of its new destinations, Madrid.

Cleaver said a second round of early bird offers is likely in January/February for the same travel period, “but the second round never offers the same level of saving as the first round”.

He said the strong Australian dollar was driving overseas travel but travellers who booked closer to their travel dates last year were again seeing

the value of taking up early bird offers.

APT chief executive Chris Hall says early bird offers for traditional European touring “lost a bit of their lustre” over the years, but are now coming back as tour companies, airlines and other partners prove to consumers they can provide the best value.

He said APT’s early bird sales across the board were up 80 per cent on last year – admittedly “not the best benchmark” – and were still above 2008 levels.

Bookings were also being made much earlier, returning to pre-GFC trends. He said last year many people made more last-minute bookings – six to eight months out instead of 12 months for European cruises; and three to four months for travel to Canada, instead of the usual eight to nine months.

“I am a believer,” he says. “Early birds do drive consumers and change their behaviour to booking early. There will always be consumers who will take the last-minute deal but people who want to plan ahead and be sure that the price is guaranteed and locked in and taken care of know to book the early birds.”

“Early bird deals give that confidence in a good deal and they get exactly what they want.

“That is why our clients travel with us – they have the security and confidence that they have surety of cabin, date, ship, pre-and post accommodation.”

He said consumers who researched their travel plans on the internet were able to see through anything that was not a genuinely good deal.

“Deals have to be real – smoke and mirrors don’t work – consumers will see through you if you don’t provide good value for money within those deals. They will see what is realistic and competitive and assess whether they are good value.”

Creative Holidays general manager product, sales and marketing, Andrew Yell believes 2011/12 will be a positive year for travel because of the strength of the Australian dollar.

He said Creative’s early bird deals to Europe offered “a fantastic opportunity” for agents to ensure they start the year ahead and lock in sales now for travel next year.

“Not only are early bird packages a fantastic way for consultants to get a head start on sales for 2011/12, they are also a great opportunity for clients to get a head start too. By booking their travel early, they will be purchasing packages at today’s great value prices, plus they will be leaving more time to save for money to spend once they reach their holiday destination,” he said.

“Europe remains the number one travel aspiration for Australians, however with the strong Australian dollar, a holiday in Europe is turning into a reality rather than a desire for many in 2011.”



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Bentours' savings on Swedish cruise, Spitsbergen explorer

BENTOURS is offering a 10 per cent early bird saving on its Gota Canal Cruise through Sweden, and up to 20 per cent on 2011 Hurtigruten cruises to Spitsbergen.

Located above the Arctic Circle, remote and untouched Spitsbergen is renowned for its breathtaking fjords, gigantic glaciers and wildlife including polar bears, whales, walrus and arctic fox.

The offer is for 20 per cent off "Svalbard Explorer", now priced from \$5151 per person for August 2011 departures, and off "Climate Voyage", with prices starting from \$3087 per person for July 2011 departures.

A 10 per cent discount applies to "Kingdom of the Polar Bear", priced from \$5922 per person for June to August 2011 departures; and the "Bears, Islands and Fjords" starting at \$4757 per person for September 2011 departures.

Bentours is also offering 10 per cent



Polar bear cubs, Spitsbergen

off "Polar Encounters" from \$3456 per person for July to August 2011 departures, as well as a free cabin upgrade (on some cabins only).

The discount applies to new book-

ings made until December 31, 2010, based on twin share accommodation.

The Gota Canal Cruise allows travellers to discover Sweden's idyllic countryside and towns on a four or

six day journey from the comfort of an elegant 19th Century canal boat.

The four-day tour starts from \$1487 per person, a saving of \$165; while the six day journey starts from \$2400 per person, a saving of \$266. Prices are based on C grade cabin twin share.

The 10 per cent discount is valid for all new bookings made until March 1, 2011 for all 2011 departures.

Linking Stockholm to Gothenburg, the 190km Gota Canal passes through some of Scandinavia's most beautiful scenery and has been voted as Sweden's greatest wonder.

Glide through the rich forests and peaceful villages of Sweden's agricultural heartland, explore old castles on the shores of one of Europe's largest lakes, ascend a series of old-fashioned locks and go ashore to the legendary Viking city of Birka.

The package includes three or five nights in the cabin category of choice with shared facilities and some meals.

Creative teams up with QF to offer early bird packages to Europe

CREATIVE Holidays is offering Qantas early bird airfares for travellers heading to Europe next year, with the added value of stopover options and accommodation in Bangkok, Hong Kong or Singapore.

Clients can have an indulgent Asian break en route to four European destinations, London, Paris, Rome or Dublin. The package is priced from \$1855 ex Perth, \$1865 ex Melbourne, \$1905 ex Adelaide, \$1905 ex Brisbane and \$1915 ex Sydney, including return economy airfares and the choice of a two-night stopover in Bangkok, Singapore or Hong Kong.

The Bangkok stopover includes accommodation at the Eastin Hotel Makkasan Bangkok, Le Fenix Sukhumvit, Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel and Towers or The Millennium Hilton Bangkok.

In Singapore, accommodation is at the Orchard Hotel Singapore, River View Hotel, Ibis Singapore on Bencoolen or the Grand Mercure Roxy Singapore. Hotel options in Hong Kong are The Harbour Plaza Metropolis, The Regal Oriental Hotel, Park Hong Kong Hotel, or The Kimberley Hotel.

Other available destinations include major cities in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Turkey.

This package is valid for sale until November 30, 2010, for travel until August 15, 2011.

Strong Aussie dollar, plus early bird deal cuts Topdeck prices



TOPDECK is offering a 7.5 per cent early bird discount on selected trips booked and paid for before December 15, for travel from April 1, 2011.

Topdeck's 2011 Europe program has 20 new trips, with most of the brochured trips priced at between 10 and 17 per cent less than in 2010. Travellers taking up the early bird discount can save up to \$406 per person.

"The strength of the Australian dollar is the primary reason that we have been able to keep our prices down in 2011," said Topdeck's global sales and strategy director Lance Batty.

"Topdeck is heading into 2011 on the back of consistent double digit growth, increased market share and outstanding customer feedback. By reducing the price of so many of our trips we're giving agents and their clients even more reason to choose Topdeck in 2011," he said.

Topdeck will offer 92 European trips in 2011 across its EuroHotel, EuroClub, Euro Camping and Explorer trip styles, each of which caters for different accommodation preferences and budgets.

"The majority of travellers choose EuroClub trips, which stay in unique, multi-share accommodation that includes a castle in Germany and a resort among the vineyards in Tuscany. These trips offer exceptional value for money," said Batty.

Experience flamenco dancing, cooking classes, with 7% discount offer

SMALL group specialist Back-Roads Touring will offer optional flamenco dancing classes, Spanish and Italian cooking courses and new tours of Spain and Sicily in 2011 – and an early bird special deal of seven per cent off all European tours booked before December 18 for travel from April to November 2011.

"Back-Roads tours are about experiencing the authentic local culture," said managing director James Nathan. "In 2011 we're introducing optional cooking classes in Greve, Tuscany and Marbella, Spain and a flamenco dancing class in Seville.

"The boom in the European river

cruise market is a clear sign that travellers are looking for a more experiential and less structured form of travel than that offered by traditional coach tours. We see the Back-Roads range of holidays appealing to this same market.

"Back-Roads tours offer a real alternative for people who don't want to join a coach tour of 40 people but don't want the challenge of a self-drive holiday either."

Back-Roads constructs itineraries to ensure that travel is leisurely paced, avoiding motorways wherever possible and travelling by country roads instead, with no more than 16 people, in unbranded vehicles.

In 2011 Back-Roads Touring will operate 26 tours through popular regions of France, Italy, Spain and the UK, and tours that combine famous cities such as Prague, Vienna and Budapest. Special interest tours include the Chelsea Flower Show and other English Gardens, Châteaux of the Loire Valley and World War One Weekend Battlefield Tours through France and Belgium.

Back-Roads Touring avoids chain-style hotels, preferring accommodation that varies from charming family managed hotels, manor houses and lake-side cottages, to castles. Tours include many meals and most entrance fees.



Dubrovnik

Peregrine discounts Europe early bookings

PEREGRINE Adventures is offering a 10 per cent early bird discount on all trips in its new 2011 Europe brochure, which includes adventures in France, Turkey, Poland, Italy, Greece, the Czech Republic and more.

The discount is for new bookings made until December 10, 2010, for travel in 2011.

New for 2011 is the "Highlights of Croatia and the Balkans" tour, which takes eight days to wind through the western Balkan states of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a dip into Montenegro.

It begins with the stately squares and public buildings of Zagreb and heads south to World Heritage Plitvice National Park. Consisting of a series of 16 dazzling lakes set in ancient forests, and fed by streams punctuated by waterfalls, the park is considered one of the most beautiful in Europe.

The tour crosses into Bosnia and Herzegovina, to visit the castles, famous bridges and forts of picturesque towns such as Bihac, Mostar and Visegrad. Jajce was once a royal city: a 20-metre waterfall uniquely forms its centre-piece.

Despite its horrific recent history, Sarajevo is rebuilding itself – and the energy is infectious. There is a day trip into neighbouring Montenegro, to the World Heritage-listed town of Kotor, and to Europe's most southerly fjord, Boka Kotorska – one of the most beautiful bays in the region. The trip ends in Dubrovnik.

The tour departs from Zagreb on May 29, June 19, July 3 and September 4, 2011 and costs \$2695 per person (or \$2425 until December 10, 2010), twin share, including accommodation, transport, entrance fees, some meals and local tour leader.

Save \$1000 on Beyond's Russian tour



RUSSIAN specialist Beyond Travel has released a selection of early bird discounts on a range of small group and escorted tours through Russia.

Travellers can save \$1000 per couple on the 17-day "Highlights of Russia and Scandinavia" small group tour which features Moscow, Suzdal, Vladimir, St Petersburg, Helsinki, Stockholm and Copenhagen. The tour is discounted to \$5600 per person (twin share) if deposits are paid by December 31.

All 2011 departures are guaranteed and are available from May to October. They include first class accommodation and daily breakfast, transportation by a high quality air conditioned coach, comprehensive sightseeing with an English-speaking tour director and return transfers.



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