

Avoid August and pay less for a better holiday

Sophie Butler

TRAVEL ADVICE FROM THE EXPERT

Have you booked your summer break yet? If you're planning to travel in July or August you may end up wondering whether you'd be better off staying at home. Rocketing prices, teeming airports and steaming temperatures can make these months hard to bear. If you are not tied to school holidays, it's far better to avoid them completely.

To my mind, May, June and early autumn are the best times for travel, particularly to the Mediterranean. Not only are there are plenty of bargain packages around, but resorts are less crowded and the weather can be glorious.

Book your flight now, and you should still be able to find good fares for these periods (particularly if you aren't travelling over holiday weekends). For the best deals, time your travel so that you leave midweek – Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are usually the cheapest days – and for shorter weekend breaks, plan to travel between Saturday and Tuesday to get the lowest fares.

If you don't much mind where you go, you can safely leave making plans until the last minute, as there are always packages or seat-only deals available to some destinations. Tour operators and travel agents anxious to fill local spare capacity as the departure date draws near will flag these up on their websites.

Booking hotels is even less of an issue. The great thing about travelling off-peak is that, unless you want to stay in a particularly sought-after

hotel, you can hide your time until nearer departure.

So for the best bargains, think strategically. Travelling to a country where the season traditionally takes a few weeks to get under way – such as Greece or Sardinia – can reap rewards. So can choosing new hotels that are keen to establish themselves by attracting guests using low room prices.

Larger, top-end hotels, which are fully staffed in preparation for the busy summer months, can have lots of rooms to fill in the quieter patch before the July and August rush. Their early season offers may be disguised as "value-added

'Resorts are less crowded and the weather still glorious'

extras" such as room upgrades, extra nights or complimentary dinners.

For September or early October trips, it's best to book before the summer for the best deals because a miserable British summer will see a rush of people wanting to get away for some late sunshine.

For teachers and parents of school-age children, time your travel for the second half of August. Prices can drop by as much as 20 per cent in the last fortnight of the school holidays, but you won't lose out in other ways: the sea will be at its warmest and the temperatures will be more comfortable.

TEN REASONS TO TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE SUMMER PEAK

1. Hotels are cheaper A week's half board at a four-star hotel in Majorca, for example costs £425 in mid-May compared with £599 in August through Thomas Cook.

2. Availability You're unlikely to find a room in the glitzy hotels in places such as northern Sardinia, which are swamped with rich Italians and other Europeans in August. Go in May, and you'll have the pick.

3. Villas are cheaper Self-catering prices escalate in high season. A house sleeping four with a pool in Tuscany, for example, doubles in price from £795 in May to £1,650 in August.

4. Fares are lower Saturday to Saturday flights from Stansted to Nice with a no-frills airline such as easyJet, for example, soar from £56.88 per person in mid-May to £281.82 in August.

5. Weather is often more pleasant May in the Med is the best time for spring flowers and lush landscapes.

6. Swimming pools are heated The sea may still be chilly early in the season but hotels are more likely to heat their pools (it's worth checking).

7. Service is better Because hotels are fully staffed but not fully booked, you'll get better service.

8. Fewer crowds Restaurants, beaches and tourist sights will be less busy.

9. Travel is easier Airports are quieter – BAA says its airports handled a total of 15.2 million passengers last August making it the company's busiest month, compared with 13.8 million in June.

10. No nolsy children Schools won't have broken up so no families with older children (although you may have to contend with babies and under-fives).

ONLINE

Previous consumer columns by Sophie Butler telegraph.co.uk/travel

My husband and I are off to Australia. Do you have any advice on how to recover from this long, direct flight?

MH, by email

There's a good Health & Wellbeing section on British Airways' website (www.ba.com).

Email queries to sophie.butler@telegraph.co.uk. Sophie Butler regrets she cannot reply to any queries not used for publication.

GOODBUYGUIDE

21STCENTURYDIVA.CO.UK BESTSELLERS

WHAT IS IT? A website (08447 700165; www.21stcenturydiva.co.uk) selling IT solutions, such as laptops, MP3 players, digital cameras and accessories, plus laptop bags and sleeves, and iPhone cases, designed to appeal to women.

WHY BUY? Not because you're a woman and therefore need help buying a new laptop or camera, but because you're a woman and therefore want to know what the latest models are without having to wade through a pile of lads' mags. Yes, many of the items do come in pink but there's plenty of black, silver and, in the case of one laptop, embossed leather. But accessories are where the site really excels: if you're going to travel with your beautiful new Apple Air (or want to disguise your clunky old G4), you'll need something equally beautiful to carry it in and 21stcenturydiva has some of the most stylish leather laptop bags and padded sleeves on the market.

FIRST CLASS OR ECONOMY? 21stcenturydiva sells premium brands, including Apple, Tom Tom, Toshiba, Sony, Canon and Belkin. Laptop bags by designers such as Mandarin Duck, Yuki Loves and Paul Smith Design for Acme range from £39-£178.99.

WE LOVE The slim, Brescia leather laptop case by Maze, £79.99; the Shamira gold laptop sleeve with groovy fuschia lining, £75.99; and the silver-coloured 1GB USB stick with diamond detail. £29.99 (21stcenturydiva makes a donation to Breast Cancer Awareness for every one of these it sells).

COULD DO BETTER How about mobile phones, iPod docking stations and travel speakers?

VERDICT Everything is so gorgeous you'll start with a laptop bag and end up buying the latest laptop.

MAGGIE O'SULLIVAN



1. Fuji Finepix Z10fd digital camera, £105.99



2. Apple MacBook Air, £1,223.99



3. Leather iPhone case with Swarovski crystals, £109.99



4. Brescia leather laptop bag, £79.99



5. Shamira gold laptop sleeve with fuschia lining, £75.99



6. Chocolate brown leather laptop bag, £135.99

TEN TOP TRAVEL WEBSITES*

1. Opodo (www.opodo.co.uk) awarded 67 marks out of a possible 100
 2. British Airways (www.ba.com) 65 marks
 3. Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk) 62 marks
 4. STA Travel (www.statravel.co.uk) 58 marks
 5. Lastminute (www.lastminute.com) 56 marks
 6. Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com) 55 marks
 7. Ebookers (www.ebookers.com) 54 marks
 8. Expedia (www.expedia.com) 53 marks
- Travelocity (www.travelocity.com) 53 marks;
BMI (www.flybmi.com) 53 marks

* Evaluated by Webcredible against 20 best-practice usability guidelines

READERS' QUERIES

My 17-year-old son and four of his friends plan a touring holiday after A-levels this summer. I'd like them to go through a tour operator rather than booking independently. Can you advise, please? LE, by email

See Abta's website for a listing of student specialists.

We are having difficulty in finding a studio or apartment on the Livorno coast in Italy.

ET, by email

The best website to try is www.costa.deglitruschi.it (the website of the tourist board of that area). You choose what type of accommodation you want and where you want it, and it provides links to private companies.

It's a tricky age, as tour operators and travel agents say you need to be at least 18 to book a holiday. However, Abta (www.abta.com) says the problem can be overcome if at least one person in the group is 16 or over.