

Plan Ahead for your Winter Getaway

The stores are starting to put winter clothes on the racks, there is frost in the morning air and my tan has already started to fade. It's September. The time of year when I begin to dream about powder white beaches, balmy breezes and clear Caribbean waters.



If you haven't already started saving, now is the time to make plans for your "winter blues getaway".

If you plan in advance, almost everyone can afford to take a winter break.

The first thing you should do is choose a location. The most popular destinations for Maritimers are Dominican Republic, Cuba and Mexico. Depending on your preferences - site seeing, night life or rest and relaxation, for example, you will probably enjoy one destination more than another.

If you are an experienced traveler, you can save money by booking your trip on-line. Many tour operators have their own website where you can choose a package and save a substantial amount of money. The catch is you have to do your own research on the location, resort, activities, etc.

If you are an inexperienced vacationer it is wiser to select a travel agent and an all inclusive vacation so you will have help choosing a destination and you won't have to worry about booking transportation or accommodations.

With an all inclusive vacation you pay a one-time price, which includes your airfare, accommodations, food and drink. The only extras you will have to pay are tips, souvenirs and excursions. You won't have to incur any unexpected expenses, which is important when you are trying to stick to a budget.



As for accommodations, there are a variety of choices from one star to five star resorts. Ask your travel agent what type of accommodation would suit you, whether he or she has been there or whether he or she has a client who has.

You should also check out various websites where

people relate their experiences about the places they have stayed.

If you are flexible, the best deals are last minute. You may only find out about the deal within a week or a day, but as long as you have the time off and the cash in place, you can pay, go and save up to 50 per cent.

When you are determining the cost of a trip, be sure to factor in travel insurance. Most people have medical plans through their employer, but you should also have trip cancellation in case you get sick and can't go or have to come back early. You can buy insurance through most travel agents, credit unions or banks.

Although some tour companies have their own payment plans where they charge interest, it is not recommended. If you can, pay for your trip with cash. You don't want to come home and make payments on a trip you have already taken.

So how do you save enough to be able to pay in cash?

First, determine how much money you're going to need.

You will need money for transportation, accommodations, food and of course, fun. A basic rule is to add an extra five to 10 per cent onto your expenses in case of an emergency.

Don't forget to involve your children in budgeting. You can give them a certain amount of money or have them budget their allowance for souvenirs and treats.

The next step is to set up a savings plan.

For example, let's say your trip is going to cost \$2000. The first thing you should do is create separate account for vacation money. If you set a year as your deadline, you would need \$167 per month or \$77 per pay based on a two week pay period.

Have the \$77 automatically credited to your vacation account. Once you get used to putting this money aside, you probably won't miss it.

Of course, the earlier you start saving, the lower your payments. If you had two years instead of one, you can cut your payments in half, \$83.50 per month and \$38.50 per pay day based on a two week pay period.

Since a year or two is too short for a long term investment, shop around instead for the highest interest savings account, term deposit or GIC. Make sure there isn't a penalty for early withdrawal.

Since some countries prefer US dollars, you can make your trip even more affordable by exchanging your Canadian Currency for US currency when the values are low. You can also pay yourself by using a frequent flier miles program. Most credit card companies have loyalty travel programs.

At OMISTA you collect points every time you use your Global Payment MasterCard. You can redeem the points for free travel from the Choice Rewards Travel Agency for any type of travel including train, bus, air, car rentals, cruise or to reserve a hotel room. You can also book tickets for flights on any airline at any time and to any destination. There are no blackouts or seating restrictions and you can book travel in someone else's name.



If you still don't think you will have enough money to pay for your trip think about things that you can live without for a few months and where in your budget you can cut back.

If you are going on vacation with friends, you can share accommodations or you may decide to stay at a 4 star resort instead of a 5 star.

You could also give up a few luxuries. Do you really need to eat out for lunch? Do you really need to buy coffee every day? Could you quit buying lottery tickets?

By cutting back, savings can add up quickly. If you stop drinking two cups of coffee a day you save \$90 a month. If you smoke one pack of cigarettes a day, by quitting you would save \$240 a month.

And don't forget to save your change. Recycle those cans and deposit your change in your piggy bank.

By being creative, planning ahead, sticking to a savings plan and carefully choosing your destination, you are going to be saying "Aloha" to the Caribbean sooner than you might have thought.

Bon Voyage!