

Travel Your Way

Whether you love sports, history, or something else altogether, there's a vacation made for you.

By Julie Collins

If long days spent lounging on sunny beaches or whirlwind tours of every site in a city are getting old, perhaps it's time to try something new with your next vacation—like a trip tailored to your interests, whatever they are.

"You may have been to a location before, but looking for themes lets you see something in a new light," says Jamie Moore, general manager of travel operations at GeoPassage, an online travel company that helps people create customized tours. From architecture to wine, here or abroad, you'll find tour packages that highlight whatever inspires you. And if you don't? Then you can find companies willing to create the perfect getaway.

Finding the Right Fit

The first step in planning a special-interest vacation is to figure out what your interests are. Do you love cooking? Maybe a tour focused on a city's culinary delights is right for you. Are you always looking for more adventure? A trip focused on kayaking or hiking might be ideal.

Once you narrow down your interests, it's a matter of finding the right company to help plan your trip. One of the best ways to ensure you are picking a reliable company is to search the membership directory of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) on its website, www.ustoa.com. There, you will find listings for active members broken down by special interest or destination. "USTOA member companies have to meet the travel industry's highest standards," says spokesperson Linda Kundell.

If the thought of a tour conjures images of masses of weary travelers crowding onto

buses to listen to guides drone on about the minute details of a destination's history, think again. Today's tours are no longer "one size fits all," so in addition to focusing your tour by interest, you will want to consider what type of tour best fits your travel needs. (See the tip box, *page 24*, for the main tour types.)

Peruse the itinerary options for the companies on your list carefully before you make your decision. "See what's included and what's not included in the price," Kundell recommends. "Also check the pace—look at how much activity is included every day and see if it's comfortable for you."

And, Kundell stresses, be sure to read the fine print carefully so you know when payments are due and what the cancellation policy is. "Also look for guarantees in terms of departures so you know that if the tour isn't full, the tour operator isn't going to cancel. And look for price guarantees so the companies won't add surcharges for fuel or currency," she says.

A Major League Experience

One of the best parts of special-interest travel? The benefits that come along with your package, which you likely wouldn't get if you were to set up the same trip on your own. Take, for instance, Major League Baseball (MLB) spring training packages to Arizona and Florida. If you chose to travel alone, you would be responsible for arranging air travel, ground transportation, lodging, and tickets to the games—which can be hard to come by, particularly if you want to travel to games at a number of ballparks.

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Package Deals vs. Planning on Your Own

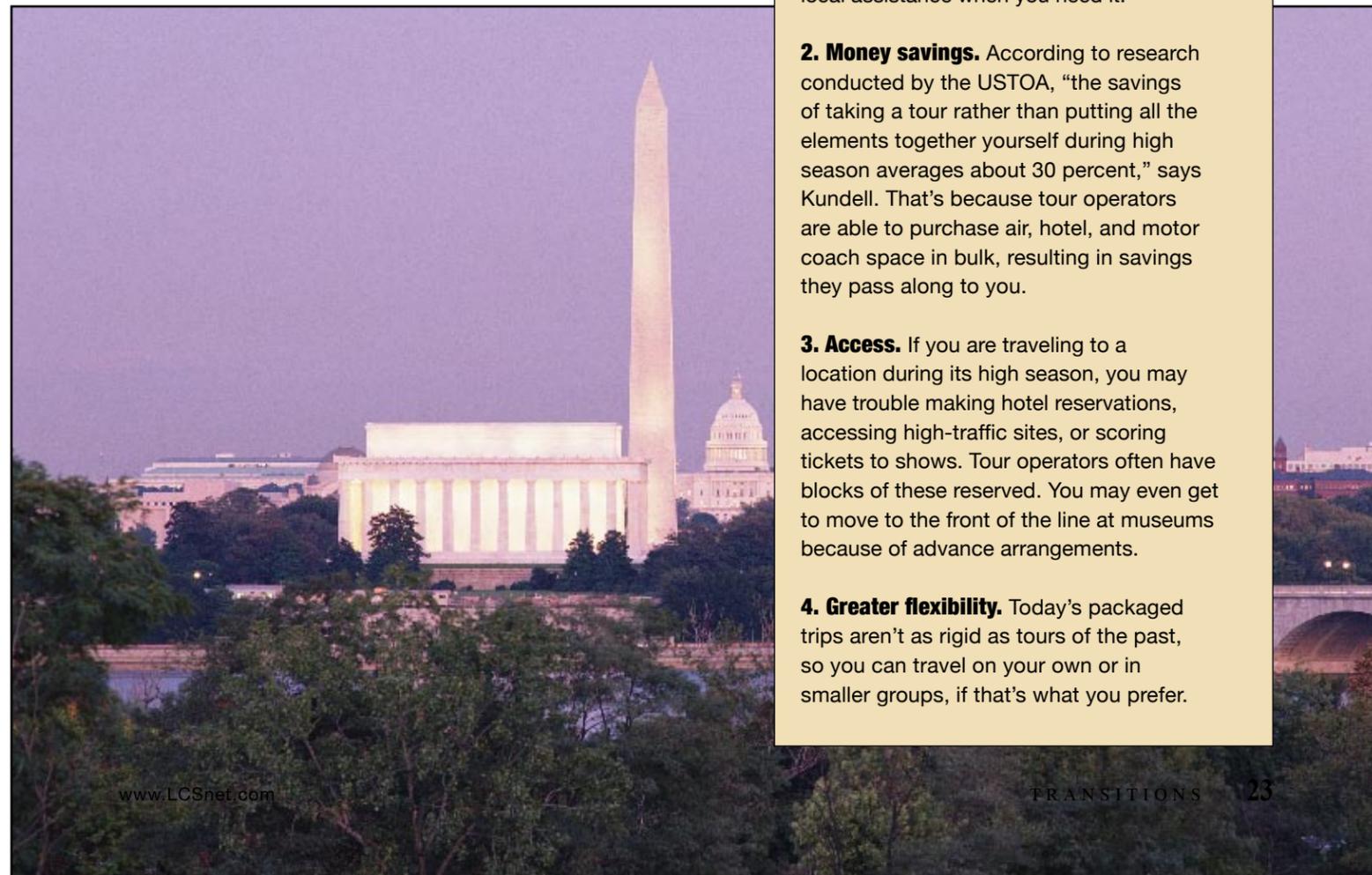
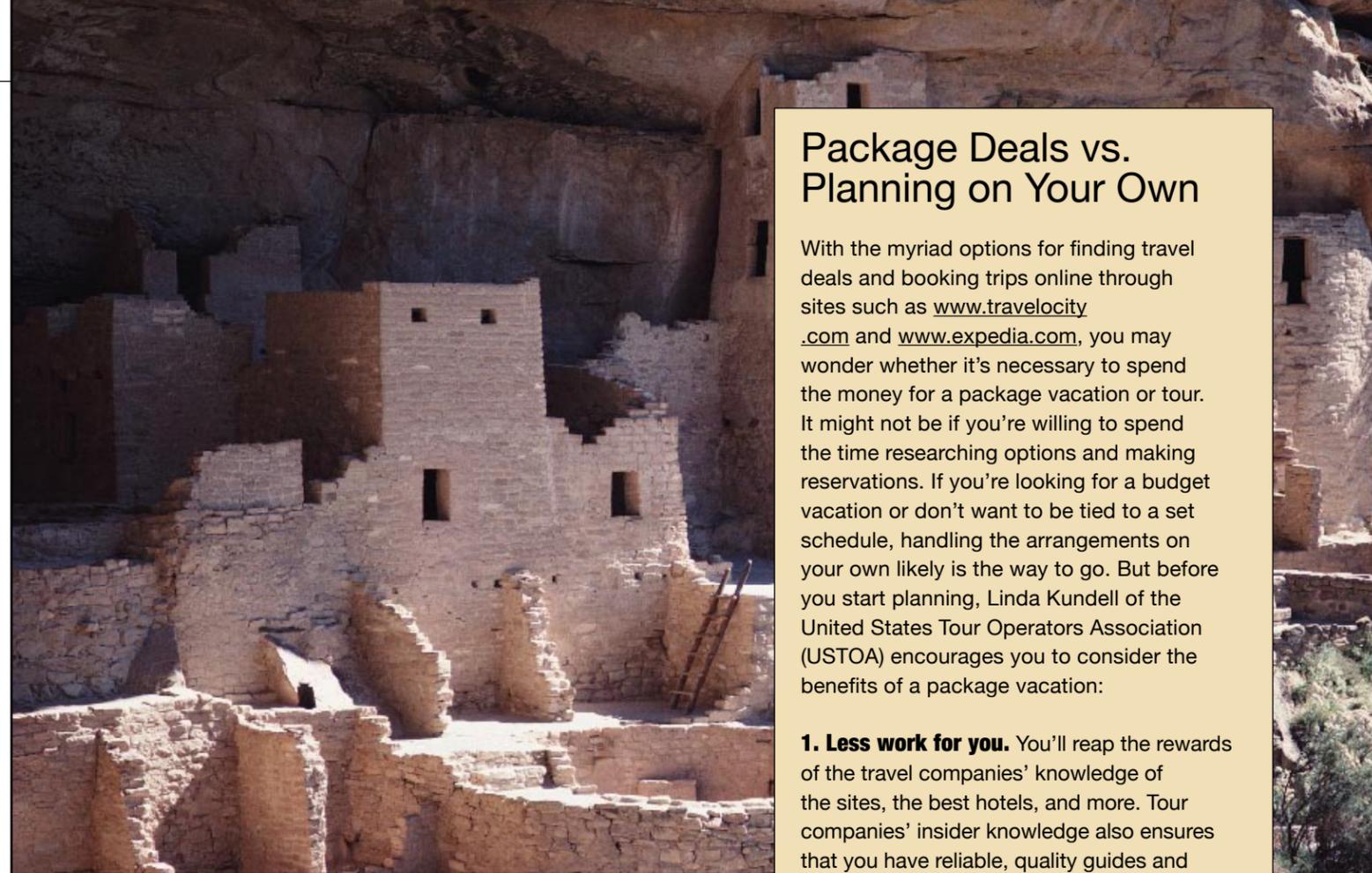
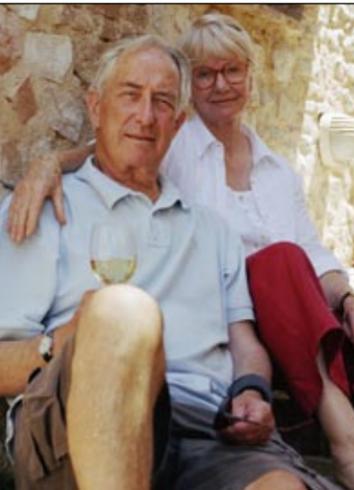
With the myriad options for finding travel deals and booking trips online through sites such as www.travelocity.com and www.expedia.com, you may wonder whether it's necessary to spend the money for a package vacation or tour. It might not be if you're willing to spend the time researching options and making reservations. If you're looking for a budget vacation or don't want to be tied to a set schedule, handling the arrangements on your own likely is the way to go. But before you start planning, Linda Kundell of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) encourages you to consider the benefits of a package vacation:

1. Less work for you. You'll reap the rewards of the travel companies' knowledge of the sites, the best hotels, and more. Tour companies' insider knowledge also ensures that you have reliable, quality guides and local assistance when you need it.

2. Money savings. According to research conducted by the USTOA, "the savings of taking a tour rather than putting all the elements together yourself during high season averages about 30 percent," says Kundell. That's because tour operators are able to purchase air, hotel, and motor coach space in bulk, resulting in savings they pass along to you.

3. Access. If you are traveling to a location during its high season, you may have trouble making hotel reservations, accessing high-traffic sites, or scoring tickets to shows. Tour operators often have blocks of these reserved. You may even get to move to the front of the line at museums because of advance arrangements.

4. Greater flexibility. Today's packaged trips aren't as rigid as tours of the past, so you can travel on your own or in smaller groups, if that's what you prefer.



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With the spring training packages offered by Sports Marketing USA (www.springtrainingusa.com; 800/892-7687) and other travel companies, all of the work is done for you—yet you often play a role in choosing the specifics of the trip. “Fans can customize a package to really suit their individual vacation needs,” says Lisa Goularte, director of sales and marketing for Sports Marketing USA. This includes deciding how long your trip will be, the number of games you’d like to see, whether you’ll rent a car, or how luxurious of a hotel you want to stay at. And, because of the company’s partnership with Major League Baseball, packages include special events where you can meet with players and personnel from the team you’re following.

If you’d prefer to see as many games as possible rather than following just one team, perhaps Jay Buckley’s Baseball Tours (www.jaybuckley.com; 608/788-9600) is for you. For 26 years, Jay Buckley has offered spring training trips to Arizona and Florida. (He also offers regular-season trips to MLB parks.) The goal? To see as many teams and ballparks as possible in an eight- to 10-day trip. The packages include hotel accommodations, motorcoach transportation, breakfast, and tickets. “We visit different training sites each day,” Buckley says. “We aim to see as many of the sites as we can and as many different teams as we can.” Although the trips are all about baseball, fans stay near Walt Disney World on the Florida trip and in the Old Town area of Scottsdale on the Arizona one, so there are plenty of options for restaurants, shopping, and entertainment when you’re not at a ballpark. As an added bonus, with the intimate trips Buckley’s company hosts, “We give a lot of history of the ballparks and the cities we’re going through,” he says. “It’s a little bit like a history course along with a baseball tour. And the camaraderie is great.”

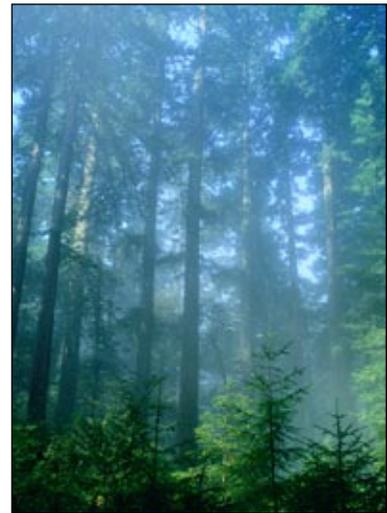
Insider’s Expertise

Jay Buckley’s Baseball Tours isn’t the only company to offer loads of information along with your vacation. With HistoryAmerica TOURS (www.historyamerica.com; 800/628-8542), whether you’re exploring the beautiful

homeland of the Nez Perce in the Pacific Northwest or retracing the steps of icons of the confederacy in Virginia, you can be assured you’ll be accompanied by a world-class historian. “If you read the bios of our historian guides, you will see that we choose only the best historians—people who both write and present history very well,” says manager Georgia O’Connor. “Our motto is ‘taking you where history happened’ and that is exactly what we do.”

And with the tours offered by GeoPassage (www.geopassage.com; 800/246-3429), you’ll benefit from insiders’ expertise, from the initial planning of your trip through the actual vacation. The level of customization is up to you—GeoPassage can help arrange airfare, hotels, and ground transportation, and leave it at that. Or the company can create detailed itineraries and hire local guides to show you around. “If you like, ambassadors can serve as personal tour guides and go everywhere with you. Others are happy in a group tour atmosphere. It depends on what the client wants,” Moore says.

Because, whether you opt for package travel or not, going where you want and doing what you want should be what vacationing is all about. ■



Types of Package Travel

Not all tours are created equal. The three most common types offer many options to fit travelers’ needs. They include:

Escorted tours, typically in the form of group travel, often feature a set itinerary with lodging, activities, and most meals included. A tour director coordinates and guides the trip.

Package travel usually features a fixed itinerary. It may include air travel, ground transportation, and hotel reservations, but there isn’t an organized group so you can do what you wish at each destination. This allows a level of flexibility while offering the convenience of having travel arrangements made for you.

Independent travel is like a trip you plan yourself. But you benefit from the tour operator’s group buying power for discounts on airline tickets, hotel rooms, and the like. And, should you choose, some companies offer hosted travel, where local hosts can help you with sightseeing and entertainment plans while you are at your destination.