

What's hot in travel right now?

By Jamie Sotonoff



Guests do yoga at Nicaragua's Yemaya Island Hideaway and Spa. Nicaragua is one of the hot travel destinations this year.

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COURTESY OF NICARAGUAN TOURISM BOARD

It's been a get-me-outta-here kind of winter.

People craving a change of scenery or pining for better weather are booking lots of beach vacations now. But they're also planning trips to explore Cuban culture in Havana, cruising past castles on a German river and renting hip condos in San Francisco.

AAA Chicago reports a sharp increase in bookings to warm weather destinations, like Hawaii and Mexico, at all of their 27 Chicago-area branches.

Chicago spokeswoman Beth Mosher recalled one suburban couple who, in December, hedged on booking a warm weather trip.

"A few weeks later, after the first polar vortex, they were back in the office saying, 'Book us now!'" she said. "All of our travel agents across the board have been very, very busy this winter."

Last month, travel experts from around the world converged in Rosemont during the Chicago Travel & Adventure Show, sharing what's hot in travel this spring.

And, admit it: Anything with the word hot in it sounds appealing right now.

Hot spots to visit: With airfares to Europe and Asia on the high side lately, more travelers are eyeing Central and South America as travel destinations. Among the places generating buzz at the travel show were Nicaragua, Cuba, Panama and the Dominican Republic. Also popular? Croatia, Czech Republic, Iceland, Myanmar (Burma) and Walt Disney World.

Yes, Disney is perpetually popular. But this year, the Orlando, Fla., park will debut many new features, including a renovated Fantasyland and high-tech “Magic+” bands that reduce wait times and eliminate the need to carry cash or credit cards.

River cruises: Large cruise ships remain popular, especially among families. But smaller (200 person or less) river cruises are booming with adults-only and senior travelers. While European rivers are in demand, so are domestic waterways. Small ships now sail the southern Mississippi and the Snake River in the Pacific Northwest, among others.

Laura Blanco, who works for Cruise Planners American Express Travel, just took her company’s seven-night cruise between Basel, Switzerland, and Amsterdam. They sailed in November. Being off season, it was a tad chilly, but they saved money. The ship stopped at UNESCO World Heritage sights, castles and other culturally significant spots. At night, they’d dock and dine ashore in quaint cafes, or watch on-ship demonstrations, like live glass blowing.

“It’s about getting to know a destination and being culturally immersed in it,” Blanco said.

More user-friendly airports: Airports are finally adapting to modern travelers’ needs, adding more electronics charging stations, offering free Wi-Fi and providing more creative ways to pass the time during layovers and delays. Many airports have opened organic or health-food restaurants, spas, art exhibits and kid play areas. O’Hare International Airport recently opened a yoga room, and Midway Airport plans to do the same.

“Working wealthy” travelers: There’s an emerging group of travelers — people seeking adventure but crunched for time — whom Travel & Leisure magazine identifies as “the working wealthy.” Tour operators are catering to this demographic, offering short but packed itineraries so travelers can do as much as possible in the limited time allotted.

Even on cruises, companies like Cruise Planners American Express Travel offer a “Short & Sweet” tour of islands like Grand Cayman, that makes several quick stops rather than an all-day trip to one place.

“Vacations are hard to come by these days, so when they have one, they want to make every moment a memory,” said Jennifer Klingsmith, franchise owner with Cruise Planners American Express Travel.

Renting homes, not hotel rooms: It’s part of what’s called the new “sharing economy.” People who live in pricey destinations (big cities, tourist towns, etc.) are renting out their homes and condos for a fraction of the cost of a resort or hotel room. Websites like airbnb.com and vrbo.com are among the most popular.

Niche cruises and tours: Whatever your interest, there’s now a cruise for it. EmmeNation, fans of plus-sized supermodel Emme, set sail on their own self-improvement-focused Whole You Cruise. Rock music fans headbang their way through the Caribbean on the Monsters of Rock Cruise, and Pittsburgh Steelers fans have their own Steelers Cruise.

Walking and cooking tours are also appealing to more crowds, and then there are unique tours, like the Dearly Departed Hollywood death tours, seeing the places where celebrities died.

Multigenerational travel: While not a new trend, it’s still a growing one, travel experts say. Grandparents have been bringing their children and grandchildren along on trips, prompting companies to now gear tours to all ages. Adventures by Disney, for example, offers a guided Italy and Switzerland trip with chef-led pasta-making classes, train rides past the Matterhorn, zip-lining, river walks and more.