High costs cause many to scale down vacations

Sam Zuckerman, Chronicle Staff Writer
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The days of cheap travel are over and may be gone for good.

Blame soaring airfares and gasoline prices, which are pushing up the cost of getting from here to there. Add to that a feeble dollar and an overall economic squeeze. The result: For many in the middle class, long-distance travel increasingly is out of reach.

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Americans, who take it as their birthright to gallop the globe, venture out on long road trips or jet across the continent for the weekend, are in a state of shock.

"Things are going up, up, up. We can't even go on a day trip," moaned Evan Wong, 43, a social worker from Daly City. "We're being priced out of the market for travel."

The key factor behind the surge in travel costs is the explosive rise in energy prices. Oil above $135 per barrel and gas at $4.50 per gallon might not last. But even if there's a dip, experts expect gasoline and jet fuel to settle at prices far above their historic levels, putting the cost of flying and driving on a permanently higher plane. And the weak dollar, which has dramatically pushed up the cost of foreign travel, might not recover its former strength for years to come, if ever.

"This isn't a blip. It's a long-term structural change," said Rich Harrill, director of the International Tourism Research Institute at the University of South Carolina.

As prices rise, some are giving up long-distance travel and staying close to home during their time off from work. There's even a new name for such behavior - the "staycation." But a
far larger number are pressing ahead with their getaways, while looking for ways to save a few bucks when they hit the road or take to the skies.

"Most people consider their holidays to be sacred," Harrill said. "Americans would rather take the sugar off the breakfast table than sacrifice the family vacation."

**Scaling back**

In order to preserve their time away, Americans are trading down and downsizing their holidays. They're choosing locales closer to where they live, taking long weekends instead of weeklong vacations and avoiding dollar-sucking destinations such as London and Paris. They're choosing alternatives to air travel that have risen relatively less in price, such as trains, buses and cruises.

They're also experimenting with alternative travel arrangements, including home exchanges, shared rides to vacations spots and "couch-surfing," the aptly named practice of crashing with strangers contacted through the Internet. And they're stepping up their use of packages, promotions and rewards that offer discounts on food, transportation and lodging.

"The consumer seems to be able to acclimate," said Suzanne Cook, research director of the Travel Industry Association, a trade group. "People have made decisions to keep traveling by modifying their trips."

San Franciscan Bill Chiles, 55, wanted to go camping in Utah's Zion National Park but was daunted by the prospect of filling the tank of his Volvo station wagon for the 1,500-mile trip. So he and his partner, Max, arranged to go with a friend from Salt Lake City who is visiting San Francisco at the beginning of July, splitting gas costs. They'll drop him back home before making the return trip.

Chiles, retired from his job as systems analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, said saving money is important.

"Our incomes are kind of limited, but everybody needs a break," he said. "It just became simple to pay the fuel costs by sharing the trip."

**Back on the bus**

For travelers, perhaps the most wrenching change has been the sharp run-up in the price of U.S. airline tickets, rolling back, at least in part, the low-cost revolution spurred by discount airlines the past two decades. Not only are fares higher, but passengers are getting slapped with fuel surcharges and fees for checking luggage.

"It's not unusual for airfares to be up 100 percent from last year, even 200 percent," said Terry Trippler, owner of Tripplertravel.com, which tracks air travel costs. The biggest jumps...
are occurring on routes where discount airlines don't have a strong presence. But even the
discounters are jacking up fares to cope with higher fuel bills.

Over the last generation, flying had become democratized as low fares allowed people across
the economic spectrum to take to the air. Now we're returning to the days when leisure
flights were luxuries.

"Airlines are not going to be mass transit like they have been," Trippler said. "People who
used to take the bus are now taking the plane. They're going to have to get back on the bus."

For Diane Schreiber, 40, a public relations consultant from Brisbane, it's a question of how
often she can see her mother, who lives in New York. Schreiber's mom has been visiting
three or four times a year, taking advantage of heavy discounting on the San Francisco-New
York route spurred by JetBlue Airways' entry into the market. Now, with the cheapest
round-trip tickets near $400, mother and daughter might have to get together less
frequently.

"It's a daily conversation with my mom," Schreiber said. "The distance was never cost-
prohibitive and now it's turning into that."

The urge to go

Despite the obstacles, the travel bug is hard to resist. And so people are making do. They're
planning months, even years in advance, to take advantage of discounts. Or they're
improvising.

Bert Hill, 60, a San Francisco bicycling safety instructor, drove to the Seattle area with his
son and daughter-in-law for a family reunion. This week, the next leg of his trip will take
him to a convention in Portland, Ore. He's getting a ride part way and cycling the rest. Then
he'll hop on Amtrak's Coast Starlight train home, which is costing him $87 with his AAA
discount.

"When you were in college and you wanted to travel, you'd put a sign up," he said.

You might say that Hill is going back to the way it used to be - sharing rides, staying with
friends and relatives, taking the train. It looks like a trend.

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