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It's that time of year again. Summer's over, the kids are back in school, the weather is cooling down. It's a perfect time to fall into a vacation deal.

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Autumn is a perfect time to get away – and save money in the process



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updated 9/17/2010 4:38:08 PM ET

It's that time of year again.

Summer's over, the kids are back in school, the weather is starting to cool off and everyone's thoughts are turning to vacation.

Well, maybe not everyone, but for some contrarians, a fall getaway is more than a passing thought. They wouldn't dream of going away any other time.

"People are looking for good values and package deals that pack in fun, activities, sampling and still save money," said Gary Knowles, a tourism marketing expert and former communications director for Wisconsin Tourism.

And, he added, they're finding it.

"The prices are amazing," said Sarah Maciejewski, a contrarian traveler from McLean, Va., who prefers the Caribbean in the fall — storms and all. "We figure the likelihood of a hurricane hitting exactly where we are is not great but that if a hurricane does pop up somewhere in the Caribbean, we'll probably get a couple days of rain but probably not much else."

Most travelers move with the herd, taking beach vacations during the summer and heading to the mountains when it snows. But a select few do it the other way around.

It isn't so much the fact that people taking these vacations think differently, but that they are richly rewarded for their decisions by getting better service, lower prices and usually, a superior vacation experience.

Once the tourists leave, locals often let down their hair, and travelers are far likelier to see a place for what it is. Cheri Gaudet, a marketer from Springvale, Maine, visited Fatima, Portugal, during the off-season and found that she "got more of a taste of what it means to be Portuguese," she said. "We walked through an olive grove from Fatima to an old village where people still live much the way they used to a hundred or more years ago. We visited a medieval town called Santarem and enjoyed losing ourselves in its narrow streets."

Many people return to the same destination summer after summer and never see it for real.

An off-season getaway doesn't have to be to a place everyone normally goes to. For example, how about a one-week cycling trip to Cuba by way of Canada? "A little illegal," said Alan, a New York-based energy consultant who asked that his last name not be used. "But a great cultural experience." Americans are not allowed to travel to Cuba as long as the U.S. embargo remains in place. However, even "forbidden" destinations have high and low seasons. And there are rewards for waiting until the throngs of Europeans leave Cuba: It's all yours.

Vacationing during a quieter time can be more eventful. "There's an opportunity to meet local people, experience their foods, customs and ideas," said Sarah Melamed, an Israel-based food blogger. She heads to places like China and Thailand with her three boys in tow and is planning to visit the western Balkans — including Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania — later this year. "These vacations are often cheaper, less crowded and always so much more interesting," she added. When the tourists leave, a lot of the tourist traps — T-shirt shops, fast-food stands, campsites — close down. If nothing else, you can feel more like a local and less like a walking dollar bill.

Speaking of dollars, off-season getaways can be considerably cheaper.

Where to go? For video blogger Alex Berger, it's Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. Two weeks' vacation costs him between \$2,000 and \$3,000, including airfare. "Traveling during the off-season can be a huge money-saver," he said. "Off season offers a significantly cheaper option for the budget-conscious. Less hassle and increased room availability, most of the time. Greater access to locals. Better insights into local culture and increased camaraderie among travelers."

Ready to book your off-season vacation? Hang on.

There are, of course, some drawbacks to going against the grain. Many popular restaurants and attractions shut down when the guests stop coming, so your vacation could get interesting in ways you may not want.

And of course, there's the weather. If you take a beach vacation in the fall or winter, it might get chilly.

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“When road-tripping in the winter from Minnesota, we have to come to grips with the realization that our trip may be altered or canceled due to snowstorms,” said Linda Kramer, a contrarian vacationer who ought to know — she lives in Minnesota. “Hurricanes can have the same effect on fall travel to the Southeast U.S. and other areas.”

Oh, and if you’re worried about high airfares — don’t. Seth Kaplan, an airline expert who writes for Aviation Weekly, says prices should be “decent,” predicting they’ll “certainly be cheaper than in 2008 but somewhat more expensive than in 2009.”

On balance, the out-of-the-ordinary vacation is often superior to anything you’d experience during tourist season. It’s one travel industry offer you shouldn’t feel bad about falling for.

Christopher Elliott is the ombudsman for National Geographic Traveler magazine. You can read more travel tips on his blog, elliott.org or e-mail him at celliott@ngs.org.

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