

Nine Travel Temptations for 2009

By Steenie Harvey in Ireland

Reckless spending is out, good value and deals are in. Although most vacationers need to make their travel dollars stretch further in these tough times, that doesn't mean you have to travel like a backpacker.

Local editors will likely buy more stories that are "close to home" these days. But with the right hook, articles about faraway places will still find favor. With some suggestions for story slants, here are nine destinations I wouldn't say "no" to in 2009.

Bangkok, Thailand

Night bazaars, lady-boys, and golden Buddhas always distract, but one theme for the Big Mango is inexpensive luxury. The going rate for a traditional Thai massage is \$8 to \$10 per hour, and Bangkok's hotels have slashed prices. As I write, www.agoda.com have doubles in the deluxe Sofitel Grand, Sukhumvit for \$85 a night. (Two-star hotels start at \$12.)

Then there's "the world's best street food." From papaya salad to green chicken curry, sidewalk vendors create delicious dishes for 50 cents to a dollar. Start your culinary adventure with yen ta fo--noodles in red soy bean paste with fried fish, squid, and morning glory.

Iceland

Twelve months ago, 1 US dollar bought 62 Icelandic krona. Today, you'll get 123 krona--twice the amount. If you dream of visiting this island of geysers, glaciers, and 10,000 waterfalls, there may not be a better opportunity. Since its currency collapsed last year, Iceland has become a lot more affordable.

Icelandair www.icelandair.us, has round-trip fares for \$399. An even better deal is their \$479 "Budget Getaway," on sale until April 2009. It includes round-trip airfare from either Boston or New York-JFK, and two nights hotel stay with Scandinavian breakfast.

One must-do is the world-famous Blue Lagoon and its mineral-rich geothermal waters. Day-passes are an equivalent \$26, and you can slap on silica mud face packs for free. So that's your spa article sorted.

Brussels, Belgium

The symbol of Belgium's stylish capital is the Mannekin Pis: a statue of a boy taking a leak. That's understandable. You can drink your way through around 400 alarmingly strong ales, many brewed by Trappist monks. Try Mort Subité (Sudden Death) and Delirium Tremens.

With flea-markets, antiques and multicultural Ixelles--known as Brussels' Notting Hill--another story slant could be Europe's best cut-price weekend. When business people leave town on Fridays, rates drop. (Two nights plus breakfast for doubles in the classy NH City Centre costs 129 euro www.nh-hotels.com.)

Or go chocoholic. At the Neuhaus factory shop, 6.6 pounds of gourmet liqueur chocolates cost just \$18.75, and samples are free.

With Steven Spielberg working on a movie about Tintin, Belgium's iconic cartoon character, the comic-strip museum provides another hook.

Montreal, Canada

"Some say Montreal is scary even without ghosts. Most of its citizens insist on speaking French. They eat poutine--a gruesome mess of fries, curd cheese, and gravy. And if that doesn't frighten you, hang around Bagels Etc. on Boulevard Saint-Laurent. When he's in town, it's a favorite haunt of the Godfather of Gloom, singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen."

That's how I opened a Halloween article on Montreal's apparitions for International Living. An idea for here--or any city--is what to do for free. Along with round-up pieces, look for stand-alone articles. Summer brings free ballroom dancing beginner's lessons in Montreal's parks. So if you don't know your tango from your foxtrot, you could have tons of fun with such a story.

Paris, France

Nothing dents the appeal of romantic Paris. In the first half of 2008, visitor numbers actually increased 2.2%. But as self-catering allows vacationers more control over spending, why not rent an apartment? Write about living like a local--a wonderful excuse to shop Parisian markets--and delve into your neighborhood's curiosities.

When last here, I rented a place off rue Montorgueil in Châtelet-Les Halles district. Monet painted this foodie heaven street. Shops include La Maison Stohrer, one of Paris's most famous bakeries. In business since 1730, it's credited with inventing rum babas. A studio in this neighborhood costs \$76 per night through www.homeaway.com.

Havana, Cuba

As Rough Guides put it, Cuba's "era as an island caught in time could be drawing to a close as the United States looks to ease restrictions on the communist-run nation. Experience the motors, mojitos and music before the hordes arrive."

Great theme. But one of the few legitimate ways Americans can visit Cuba is as a freelance writer. With Barack Obama as president, change is expected, and numerous editors will want stories. Havana's literary place to stay is Ambos Mundos Hotel (www.hotelambosmundos-cuba.com). Describing it as a "good place to write," Ernest Hemingway penned the first chapters of For Whom the Bell Tolls in room 511.

Sanliurfa, Turkey

Readers love "shopping bargain" stories, especially if rug merchants lurk in the background. My best buy last year was an exquisite Persian wool sumak--a flat-weave kilim rug overlaid with hand-embroidery. Haggled down to \$75, it comes from the mysterious pilgrimage town of Sanliurfa.

Reputedly the prophet Abraham's birthplace, Sanliurfa is in Turkey's southeast, part of the antique lands of Asia Minor. With prices way below those in touristy Istanbul, its bazaar has magical imagery everywhere. You'll see coppersmiths, leatherworkers, shoppers with hands and faces tattooed with indigo-blue marks, and of course, carpet traders. Other enticing bazaar towns in this region include Gaziantep and Mardin.

Abruzzo, Italy

Prove "affordable Italy" exists by visiting its Abruzzo region. Fringed by golden Adriatic beaches, this secret corner of Europe's most seductive country stitches together mountains, olive groves, and picturesque hill towns. Including wine, dinner one night in a village restaurant only cost \$101 for seven of us.

My favorite Abruzzo town is Sulmona, home of confetti. Here the word means sugar-coated almonds, not the colored paper horseshoes that shower weddings. Part of Italian family celebrations, confetti color codes include white candies for marriages, sky-blue or pink for christenings, and green for engagements. I never got to Sulmona's confetti producers, but it would make a great article.

Chichen Itza, Mexico

Who cares about saving pennies if the world is about to end? The Mayans predicted it will happen on December 21st, 2012. According to USA Today, book publishers are already going apocalyptic. Now's the time to start investigating Chichen Itza and other Mayan sites for your end-of-the-world stories...

[ED. NOTE: Steenie Harvey is International Living's roving Euro-editor and a freelancer whose by-line has appeared in The Washington Post, The World & I, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, and The World of Hibernia among many others in the States, Ireland, Britain, Australia, and Germany.

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