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TRAVEL

Switzerland on a budget 0

BY ILONA KAUREMSZKY, SPECIAL TO QMI AGENCY

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A view of Zurich, Switzerland. (Shutterstock)

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Q: I couldn't help notice all the beautiful locations *The Bachelor* TV series visited in Switzerland. But I have heard it's an expensive country. Is a visit attainable or is it best kept in the dream vacation category?

— J. Graziano, Scarborough

A: Known for Swiss banks, swish ski resorts, and swanky watches, Switzerland has long been associated with wealth. But visiting is more affordable than you might think.

The Switzerland Tourism Office has put together an affordable vacation section on its website — [myswitzerland.com](#) — that has subcategories on accommodation, transit and cycling. Picture sleeping at a monastery or on a farm surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Here are some finds that won't break a traveller's piggy bank:

— Basel, the country's art hub, has a special one-night accommodation package that includes a 24-hour museum pass, breakfast, and a public transit ticket for about \$110. The package has some black-out dates and is valid until Dec. 31. See [myswitzerland.com](#).

— In Ticino, guest rooms are available in a quaint farmhouse called Centro Alternativo Lungta Benitt ([centrolungtaen.wordpress.com/lungta/](#)). A room with breakfast is priced around \$60-\$81.

— In Bern, the capital, locals and visitors can make a splash in "the loveliest river pool in the world." Known as the Marzili bath, the natural pool has been a popular watering hole for centuries. In the summer of 1978 it even made

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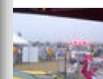
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international headlines when sunbathers went topless. The entry fee? Free.

The Swiss Tourism Association monitors the quality of accommodation through a star system.

Q: Is there a secret to booking cheap airline tickets?

-- R. Knapp, Toronto

A: Industry experts have studied this question. The verdict: Book early.

According to a recent study published by the Airlines Reporting Corporation (ARC), airline passengers got the cheapest airfares six weeks prior to their flight. "Although low fares are available over the 120-day cycles, the vast majority of tickets costing below the average fare were purchased about six weeks before the flight date," said Chuck Thackston, ARC's managing director of data and analytics. "We're not advising people to purchase tickets only at this time during the cycle as there is no guarantee they will receive the lowest price of the year; it is just what the data indicates and we have seen this pattern over the last four years."

Another company, Farecompare.com, studied its database and concluded the cheapest day to fly domestically in the U.S. is Wednesday.

"Wednesday is one of the three cheapest days, the others are Tuesday and Saturday. Friday and Sunday are the most expensive days to travel," Farecompare reports on its website. "The cheapest time to fly is typically the first flight out in the morning -- yes, that means you have to get up at 4 a.m."

The company is currently researching the best days for international air travel.

Q: We're pretty familiar with some of the War of 1812 festivities in Canada but how about in the U.S?

-- L. Hoang, Scarborough

A: In the U.S., the War of 1812 was the biggest war the Niagara region had ever seen. Many museums, historic sites and parks will be commemorating the war. For instance, Old Fort Niagara in Youngstown, N.Y. is planning a battle reenactment. The blockbuster costumed event is scheduled for Sept. 1-2. Organizers say daily weekend programs will take place from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. A night battle depicting the British capture of Fort Niagara is planned for Sept. 1 at 7 p.m. The fort is open daily. See oldfortniagara.org.

Q: A friend and I are travelling to New York City in the fall and we are wondering if you know of any good theatre-hotel deals.

-- A. Spall, Kitchener

A: September and October are high season for New York City so you won't find too many deals. A New York City representative recommends Labour Day weekend and the weeks before and after American Thanksgiving as the best times to visit for deals in the fall.

NYC & Company, the New York City tourism bureau, has created some web pages with budget travellers in mind. Check out Nycgo.com and the newly launched nycgo.com/savethedate. The website allows visitors to select their dates and search for hotel, theatre and restaurant deals as well as information about festivals and exhibitions. Be sure to bookmark the site and check regularly for new deals. At press time there was no information for fall. Also check nycgo.com/hotels for accommodation deals.

"Most value-added stays begin around Thanksgiving. However some hotels are offering 25% off Sunday stays throughout the fall," says Meghan Gogan of NYC & Company's Canadian representative.

Q: How much of the Trans Canada Trail is connected?

-- M. Fazari, Woodbridge

A: The multi-use trail is now 73% connected. This nationwide trail network is scheduled for completion in the next five years -- in time for Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017. For more, see tctrail.ca.

Q: Our son will be attending university in the fall. For one of our last family outings we would like to take him on a biking/hiking trip near Kingston. Attending a festival or event is also on my list so am hoping you might suggest one nearby.

-- K. Dodd, Toronto

A: Look no further than Wolfe Island. Just 20 minutes from downtown Kingston, and easily accessible by ferry, this compact island (30 km long) is a popular hub. Cyclists, yoga buffs, hikers and canoeists drift onto its sandy shores for

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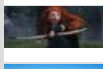


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fun and laughter.

If you go in August, don't be surprised when fans of crime novels arrive. Canada's Scene of the Crime Festival (sceneofthecrime.ca) is a popular annual event (Aug. 11 this year). Festival-goers like to mix and mingle on the home turf of Grant Allen, our country's first crime-writer who penned dozens of books.

All cycling routes begin at the Wolfe Island tourist information centre in the village of Marysville. Download a cycling map and you're off (wolfeisland.com). Among the three marked routes, my favourite is the 28-km Button Bay Loop, which winds along coastlines, through farm country, past a golf course and offers chances for seeing deer, turtles, wild turkeys, even buffalo in a pen. You'll also see an old school house, a cemetery, an old TV tower, and the latest addition -- a huge wind farm on the island's west side.

On the hiking front, it doesn't get much nicer than walking on pristine sand dunes in the Big Sandy Bay Management Area. The 404-hectare day-use area is on the island's south tip. Start your adventure by hiking the easy 1.3-km Button Bush Trail through wetlands and woodlands (bigsandybay.ca).

For more, contact the Wolfe Island Business and Tourism Association at 613-385-1875.

Q: I'm confused about recent changes to the duty-free customs allowance. What is the break down now?

-- M. Kishwar, Brampton

A: Canadians returning to Canada have increased duty-free customs exemptions which came into effect on June 1. The new allowance for travellers is \$200 for trips after 24 hours and \$800 after 48 hours. However, there is still no duty-free allowance for same-day trips (less than 24 hours).

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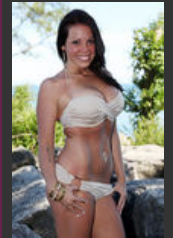
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