

Savvy Off-Season Travel

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AN EXPERIENCED TRAVEL WRITER
REVEALS THE SECRET GLORIES
OF THE OFF-SEASON.



FRIENDS OFTEN OFFER ME WELL-intended suggestions to explore this or that travel destination because it is Undiscovered, or Different, or Beautiful, or Culturally Stimulating, or Great-for-Shopping, or whatever. But a caveat is sometimes attached: "Just don't go in March," they warn, or maybe it's May or January or August that's a no-no. "That's the off-season!"

The most dreaded indictment in travel, yes? To go anywhere in the off-season. Nobody but an uninformed dolt, or perhaps an indiscriminating bargain hunter, would think of showing up in a great travel destination at the wrong time of year, right? Apart from maybe saving a few bucks, why would anyone go to Cape Cod in November? Or Hong Kong in February? Or Iceland—ever?

It just isn't done.

Well, yes it is. I have done it. Often. And I'm here to say that some of the most

pleasant, most memorable travel experiences came from off-season arrivals in places that were at that moment off-limits according to the calendar. This didn't always happen by design. Sometimes it was just by accident that I was in a right place at the wrong time. But did it turn into a disaster? Almost never.



After 14 consecutive seasons as a summer visitor on Cape Cod, I yearned, finally, to go back and see what the place is like in winter. As a July-and-August person, I had seen four children turn golden brown each summer on the Cape's crowded beaches. I knew whence the whale-watching boats sailed, which restaurants served the best fried clams, who would be starring in summer theater, where to buy antiques—all the usual summer activities. But I knew all the while that there was another Cape—the off-season Cape.

Finally, one crisp New England winter, I decided to go back and find what I had never seen in summer. Beginning shortly after Labor Day, I drove from my home in Connecticut almost every weekend for a whole "off-season." As expected, most summer cottages and motels were closed and many of the roadside restaurants, too. But those old inns and guesthouses where wood smoke curled from the chimneys now seemed much more inviting than summer's endless "Vacancy" (or more like "No Vacancy") signs.

Columbus Day and a golden October came and went for me. An "all-the-fixin's" Thanksgiving dinner at the Dan'l Webster Inn in Sandwich was a virtual trip back to colonial days. There was time, too, to have encounters with real Cape Codders—a fishing boat crewman, the proprietor of a Portuguese bakery, the owner of a general store, a librarian.

Venture to Cape Cod during the off-season to experience the comfort and camaraderie of the Cape minus the tourists.

PHOTO BY CORIAN



There's plenty of beauty and even an occasional blizzard to satisfy the adventurer willing to take a trip to Iceland in the spring.

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At Christmas, Provincetown was returned to its own 7,000 residents; 30,000 tourists were gone. All the same, many of its shops were brightly lit and warm with welcome.

What did I discover? Was there an off-season on the Cape? For swimmers and sunbathers, maybe yes. But for me—a lover of the old peninsula where the Pilgrims first landed and Thoreau later walked the beach in winter—I'll spend a cozy Thanksgiving weekend at the Dan'l Webster anytime.

Another example: I went to Switzerland on a story assignment once—in May. The job would take me first to the beautiful old resort town of St. Moritz. A tight schedule had not allowed me much time for advance research. I just assumed that as long as I was not going to arrive in St. Moritz at the height of the ski season, all would be well.

Ha, ha! What I didn't know was—and who would have thought?—May is “off-season” in St. Moritz, the one month in the year when almost all the famous

hotels are closed and their staffs have departed for Italy on vacation.

How did this “mistake” turn out? Was I stranded in the street? Did I end up in a hostel? Hardly. There were a couple of small but wonderful Swiss hotels open. Their dining rooms were uncrowded; chefs came forth from their kitchens to chat with guests. The car-rental agency offered me a luxury sports coupe for a compact-car price. Weather was perfect. I met a lovely young woman in the local tourist office who had little else to do but show me around and share occasional dinners. We found a fine restaurant just over the border in Italy where high-season reservations would require a week's notice—but we just walked in.

I arrived in Iceland one “spring” to participate for a week in a roundup of Icelandic horses (which—yikes!—spend their winters outdoors). It was April, definitely off-season near the Arctic Circle, so I didn't expect balmy summer days. “But you came at the right time for smorgasbord,” I was told as I surveyed the hotel's bounteous luncheon buffet. “The

colder the water, the better the fish.” I soon discovered that I had come at the right time for more than fish.

There were, yes, some beautiful, sunny days in April, and a couple of sudden spring blizzards were just as beautiful. The uncertainty and the occasional ferocity of the weather added a whole new element to travel on the island—painted dramatic landscapes and skyscrapers that summer people never see—but in no way diminished my enjoyment of the unique Icelandic life.

Have you ever ridden a five-gaited Icelandic horse on a miles-long black sand beach in a snowstorm? You'll never forget it.

We drove about 60 of these young horses up a broad river valley over five days, stopped each night at a horse farm, corralled our animals, shared dinner with the farm family, sang old Icelandic songs in the evening, drank a stirrup cup of schnapps each morning as we mounted up.

“Do you do this in summer, too?” I asked my host.

“In summer there is only time for us to

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take care of all the tourists who come here for horse-trekking. Winter is the time to enjoy life in Iceland!"

Yes, agreed, there is often an economic incentive to off-season travel. In the Alaska cruise business, the first and last cruises of the "season" (i.e., those in May and September) are often heavily discounted. Same for Antarctica cruises in late November and in February. Likewise at my other "seasonal" travel destinations.

When winter approaches, Ireland clouds over and the tours get cheaper, if they are available at all. But Ireland is still Ireland in winter, and the Irish, bless them, are still there to talk (or drink ... or dance ...) with. Bushmills is still the oldest whiskey distillery in the world, and the scent of peat fires is even more pungent.

Off-season bargains are mostly weather bargains, in other words—a discount in consideration of the odds that it will rain or be cold or that every last gift shop will be closed. Hooray, I say. Don't let 'em scare you. Ice storms can create glistening ice palaces; rain has a sweet scent all its own; frost on the pumpkin makes a wood stove feel wonderful, and some of the loveliest gift shops I have ever seen were those which were closed for the season.

Besides, we all know that "high season" can go wrong, too. I once recommended to friends that they take the Norwegian Coastal Voyage from Bergen to North Cape in August. The scenery is unequalled in the world; the ships are authentic freight-and-passenger carriers. It is one of the greatest noncruises I know. Alas, however, my friends saw little of it. They paid full, high-season fare and they got off-season weather—it rained every day. Fate.

My daughter teaches at a school in Berlin, Germany. Cold and gray as North Europe can be in winter, she says she has come to enjoy the season more than when tourists pack the city. "Everything seems better and cozier in winter," Jenny says. "More concerts, better cooking in the restaurants, more time for libraries and museums."

Newfoundland for New Year's Eve? Cold and snowy, yes, but what a memorable few days in St. John's, the oldest city in North America. Ask your friendly travel agent if you should risk such an adventure and the answer would almost surely be no, no, never. Hong Kong in February? Not unless you like rain and fog and humidity day after day. Greece in March? Worse! Storms on the Aegean Sea, everything closed.

Well, maybe yes, but maybe no. Indeed, most of the seafood restaurants in Piraeus are closed in off-season, but the one you find open will be special and memorable and almost certainly not a tourist trap.

No travel agent would recommend a trip to Hong Kong in February, but give it a try and find it has much more to offer than rain, fog and humidity.



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