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TRAVEL COMPANION

It's a bidder's travel market

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Resort and hotel rooms are being put out for bid at prices well below retail
Luxury Link specializes in high-end online vacation auctions
Sky Auction lists a variety of resorts, cruises and hotels accepting per-night bids

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By Brad Tuttle

TEXT SIZE

Budget Travel

(Budget Travel) -- Last winter, something unprecedented happened in the travel industry. People with reservations for peak holiday weeks at popular Caribbean resorts looked over their finances -- and canceled their plans.



Resorts are selling rooms via online auctions at prices well below retail.

The resorts had to do something with all those newly available rooms, so they turned to online auction companies, which put the rooms out for bid at prices well below retail.

The trend has only gained strength recently. Luxury Link, which specializes in high-end online vacation auctions, saw its listings jump 91 percent in the second quarter of 2009 compared with the same period a year before.

So how do you get involved? Vacation auctions work like any other kind of online auction: A trip is listed on the site, and travelers bid on it until a preset end date, at which point the highest offer wins.

listed on the site, and travelers bid on it until a preset end date, at which point the highest offer wins. In many cases, picking dates and booking is then left to you. Here's how to get started. Budget Travel: 5 steps to smart bidding

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3 ways to get in on the auction

Web site: Sky Auction

With the widest variety of listings -- resorts, cruises and hotels accepting per-night bids (you decide how many nights you want) -- this fast-growing site also covers the broadest spectrum of price points.

Sample winner*: Five nights for two guests at SuperClubs Hedonism II in Jamaica (superclubs.com). Winning bid: \$910 True value: \$1,690 Savings: 46 percent

Fine print: \$20 processing fee for each winning bid; auction closing times are extended for five minutes if a new bid is submitted in the last minute.

Web site: Luxury Link

Before an item is listed at Luxury Link, the company's vetting committee uses a three-page checklist of amenities to evaluate whether a resort or travel operator meets its standards (most properties are four- or five-star).

Sample winner*: Three nights at Shaw Club Hotel & Spa in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. (shawclub.com). Winning bid: \$507 True value: \$995 Savings: 49 percent

Fine print: \$40 booking fee (the site's reservation service is helpful but doesn't come free).

Web site: Florida Vacation Auction

Florida's tourist board has its own auction arm. (It's the only location-specific vacation auction site out there.) Three to four dozen hotel and condo auctions close every Sunday night at 10 p.m., and new options pop up the next day.

Sample winner*: Two nights at Blue Tree Resort, near Walt Disney World in Orlando (bluetreeorlando.com). Winning bid: \$145 True value: \$238 Savings: 39 percent

Fine print: Cleaning and other fees assessed by some condos and resorts, which you'll be expected to pay at check-in.

* Because the retail prices listed by the auction sites are usually based on unrealistic rack rates, we searched independently for what these packages would go for on the open market. As you can see, the winning bids are still great values by comparison.

What about eBay?

Travel listings at eBay are a mishmash of come-ons and ads for travel agents, inns and condos, along with the occasional true auction -- and unfortunately, there's no quick way to zero in on the good stuff.

It's also common to find misleading listings, if not outright scams. One example: Shama Travel, an Illinois-based travel agency, frequently lists a "Buy It Now" rate of \$1.49 next to the words airline tickets and logos for United, Lufthansa and other carriers.

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consultation" -- not an actual flight.

Bottom line: Using eBay to book a trip is generally not worth the hassle. If you stumble upon something interesting on the site, contact the lister personally. Never send a payment by check or money order; instead, pay with a credit card or PayPal, both of which provide some measure of security.

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Note: This story was accurate when it was published. Please be sure to confirm all rates and details directly with the companies in question before planning your trip.

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