

by *Chris_Barnett*

A year ago, Jeanne Branthover wouldn't think twice of flying business class "almost anywhere." Now, the New York office-managing director of Boyden, the global executive search firm, asks her assistant to scour websites and other sources for the best possible airline and hotel deals.

The worldwide financial and economic plunge, she says, "have made me very cost conscious, especially when the client is paying for my travel." She has switched to JetBlue almost exclusively for U.S. trips and carries the airline's American Express card to rack up reward miles. Branthover only books international business class "if it's a really long trip, like to Asia, and even then we shop hard for the best price."

The same is true for her vacations. She flew round trip from New York to Santo Domingo in the Caribbean on her JetBlue miles and paid only \$32 in fees and taxes. Besides its usually lower fares, she switched her loyalty from the big, so-called legacy airlines to JetBlue for its "huge legroom and the TV."

Overseas, Branthover says more of her large corporate clients are flying to London on Virgin Atlantic "for its pricing, value and its luxurious upper class (if a lower fare can be negotiated). Previously, client senior executives would usually fly the airline with the most convenient schedule."

Branthover, who also heads Boyden's Global Financial Practice, has switched her allegiance to hotels, too. "We've joined Hilton and Marriott for lower prices and their frequent-stay programs. If the hotel's occupancy is low, I won't hesitate to ask for a free upgrade to a better room."

A year ago, the congenial Branthover was staying in Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons hotels. She still does occasionally, but only if her assistant can wangle a rate lower than a Hilton or Marriott in the same city. "If you shop today," she insists, "you can save unbelievable amounts of money."

Frugality on the fly is just smart business these days, Branthover contends. Particularly for consultants who usually work with CEOs or chief human resource officers. "I'm an extension of my client's business," she said. We're a partnership through all economic cycles. This is a critical time for clients to show their employees and shareholders they take cost cutting seriously. And I travel like they travel."

Casablanca's Economic Stimulus Plan: While New York hoteliers are bemoaning cutting rates to fill empty rooms, the charming, nostalgically decorated, little known 48-room Casablanca Hotel (www.casablancahotel.com) in Midtown Manhattan is wheeling and dealing with its own Economic Stimulus Plan. Their version saves money, doesn't add to the deficit. Example: rooms that fetched \$430 nightly in December (height of the shopping season, yet the stock market was still going south) now start at \$200 a

night.

The Casablanca, thankfully, isn't a Disneylandesque version of the fabled Bogie and Bergman film. But it does have a Rick's Cafe that is part mini-business center (free PC and printer), clubroom with a daily, gratis, expanded continental breakfast, and a 5-8 p.m. seven-day-a-week wine and cheese reception. Nice touch because many hotels often yank the wine and nibbles on the weekend. Here, the clubroom is open 24 hours and stocked with something tasty "fruit, cookies" for insomniacs or late arrivals.

Other giveaways: high-speed wireless Internet access in every room and throughout the hotel, colleagues can join guests for wine and cheese, and during the Friday reception, a piano player whose name is not Sam takes requests.

The Casablanca's owners have given close thought to businesspeople's needs. "We can take care of fax and copy requests in the executive offices and there's no charge for a few copies," says Adele Gutman, vice president of sales and marketing. But for more involved jobs, a block away on 43rd between 5th and 6th is a FedEx/Kinkos with a quick printer next door. All rooms also have a large table instead of a desk.

How long will discount room rates remain on the Casablanca's menu? Gutman won't offer a forecast because she cannot predict supply-demand and the computerized yield management schemes that set hotel rates day to day "and airline fares minute by minute" have not been programmed for financial meltdowns.

Still, the hotel isn't taking any chances of missing out on guests in this volatile marketplace. Just recently, it decided to rent rooms at 30 percent off its top rates April through September. But taking a page from airline pricing strategies, you prepay your room and no refunds are allowed.

Chris Barnett writes on business travel strategies that save time, money and stress. Reach him at cbarn@aol.com.

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