



... All-Inclusive Resorts Won't Say

By KAITLYN WELLS

When people book an all-inclusive vacation they envision a getaway from everything—including thinking about money. The reality? Bland food, limited drinks, substandard rooms and hidden costs. Here's what you should watch out for.

1 'All-inclusive doesn't always mean what you think.'

More than 60 years ago, Club Med pioneered the all-inclusive resort concept by charging just one fee for food and accommodations. Since then, hundreds of such resorts have opened, and some cruise lines and luxury hotels have adopted the business model, too. In the U.S., all-inclusive resorts are rebounding from the recession, according to research firm IBISWorld; their revenue is expected to grow to \$150 million by 2017.

But the "all" in "all inclusive" doesn't mean everything. "It's 'all inclusive' with an asterisk," says Laura Mandala, the managing director of tourism-industry research firm Mandala Research. At some resorts, only food and some basic activities come with that one-size-fits-all fee.

The more "premium" the perk, the more likely you'll pay extra for it. Even Club Med charges extra for things like spa treatments and motorized water sports. Xavier Mufraggi, the CEO of Club Med North America, says "What [guests] pay additional is minimal because so much is already included."

2 'We may not be any cheaper than a standard vacation.'

All-inclusive vacations are typically marketed as a cheaper option than arranging lodgings, meals and excursions separately. But "all-inclusive vacations aren't necessarily the least expensive way to go," says Peggy Goldman, the president of international-tour company Friendly Planet Travel.

One of many cases in point: The Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic. The resort's four-night "Prone to Play" all-

inclusive package includes all meals and drinks, access to nonmotorized sports, horseback riding, and other activities—starting at \$723 a night for double occupancy. The resort's standard, noninclusive package starts at \$187 a night for double occupancy; a guest would have to really pile on the extras to drive her bill up to the all-inclusive price.

Resort owners argue that convenience plays a bigger role for customers than price. For some the savings aren't worth the energy involved in planning where to eat and what to do.

3 'You'll pay more for drinks—unless you really like iced tea.'

According to the Cruise Lines International Association, a trade group, cruise lines are offering more all-inclusive options at lower prices. But those lower fees often mean that choices are limited, especially when it comes to food and beverages.

Corrie Tacke, a family therapist from Seattle, has been on eight cruises, but only recently did she and her family decide they needed to pay an extra \$49 a person a day for a beverage package. Without the drink package, Ms. Tacke would have been limited to water, iced tea, regular coffee, lemonade and juice. (Passengers who opt for the package have to purchase it for every day of the cruise, a Princess Cruises spokeswoman said.)

Guests generally should expect to pay extra for premium food and drinks. At the Casa Magna Marriott Cancún Resort, for example, meals are included in the \$360-a-night room fee, but premium entrees like lobster or steak cost \$15 extra.

4 'All-inclusive may include construction.'

A frequent complaint among tourists: Arriving at a resort only to find that it's under construction.

Club Med's Cancún Yucatán resort in Mexico, for example, is currently undergoing renovations—a fact that travelers may be unaware of if they don't call the hotel directly or book with

a travel agent. (The resort's website does say, "Coming next summer: A transformed Cancún Yucatán.")

Travel websites like HolidayCheck, Oyster, TripAdvisor and Zoover have guest-review sections where readers can find tips about renovation projects and other potential drawbacks.

5 'You'll be surrounded by sunshine—and extra fees.'

Seabourn Cruise Line Limited is the luxury sister brand to Carnival Cruises: Spokesman Vance Gulliksen describes the Seabourn fleet as "truly all-inclusive" because more amenities are included than on Carnival ships. But Seabourn charges additional fees for Internet access, just like Carnival does.

All-inclusive resorts also charge a "resort fee" or "convenience fee," common in the hotel industry, which can be as high as \$30 a night, according to the Federal Trade Commission. Hospitality companies say these fees pay for things like access to the pool, the gym and Internet.

6 'You tip us whether you know it or not.'

Tipping etiquette on all-inclusive vacations can be confusing—not least because different resorts follow different rules.

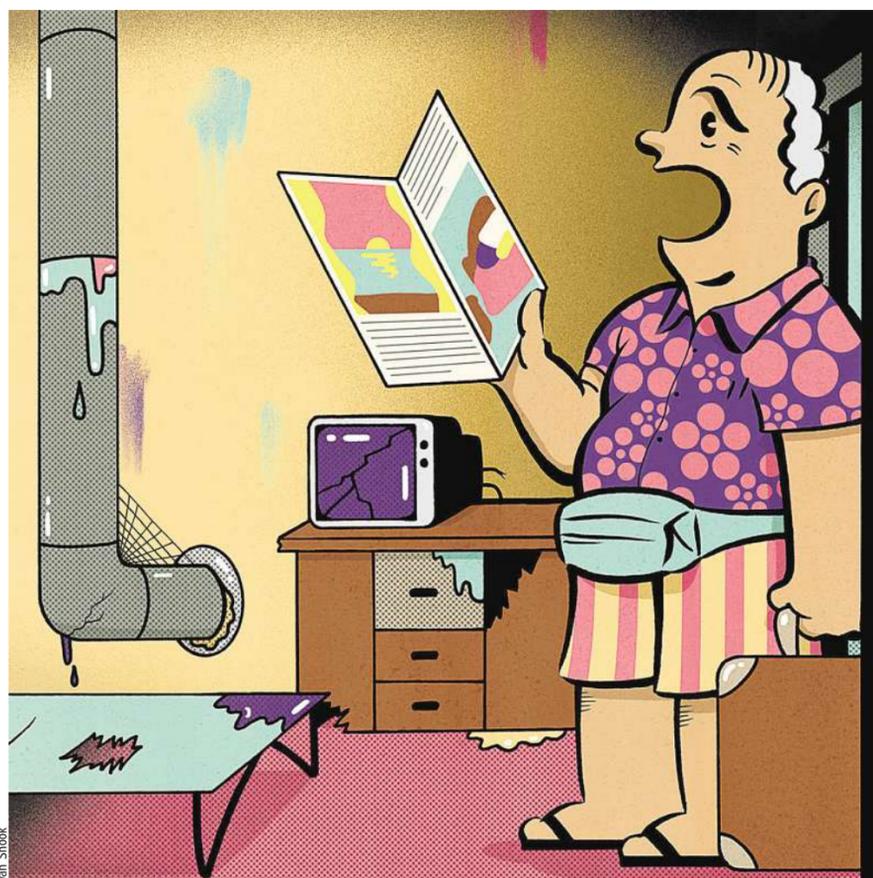
At Club Med, staff will refuse tips (gratuity is already negotiated into their pay, Mr. Mufraggi says). Sandals recommends that guests write a thank-you letter or refer new guests to its resorts. Other locations maintain that while tipping isn't required, they do see it from time to time.

Many cruise lines automatically charge gratuities for dining and stateroom staff to each guest's room—typically \$11.50 a guest a day.

7 'Local color isn't included.'

For a traveler who likes to explore other cultures and other communities, an all-inclusive resort isn't the best option, some travel agents say.

Because such resorts offer so much dining, shopping and excursion activity on-site, many are cut off from the culture of



their surrounding country.

"The traditional all-inclusive strategy is not going to benefit the local economy—period," says Friendly Planet Travel's Ms. Goldman.

8 'Good luck getting a refund—even after a hurricane.'

For all-inclusive resorts, unfortunate weather can often be a part of the package. That's particularly true in the Caribbean, where hurricane season runs from May to October.

If severe weather does hit, a refund can be elusive. At some Caribbean resorts, the reservation includes a hurricane "guarantee" that includes a refund.

But it applies only when hurricane-force winds, as defined by the U.S. National Weather Service, directly hit one of their resorts and interrupt activities.

Even in case of a direct hit, the guarantee doesn't refund the cost of flights, and blackout dates may apply.

9 'Your travel agent will make a killing off us.'

When business is good for all-inclusive resorts, it's good for travel agents. Commissions at all-inclusive resorts can range from 8% to 16%, and tour and package reservations, a category that includes all-inclusive resorts, accounted for 31% of U.S. travel-agent revenue last year, or \$10.2 billion in all, according to IBISWorld. Critics say higher commissions encourage travel agents to book all-inclusive trips even when they aren't the best deal for the consumer. Agents respond that commissions are paid by the resort itself, and don't come out of the travelers' pocket.

10 'A low price might mean a low-end experience.'

Deep discounts on all-inclusive resorts appear often on travel-deal websites, particularly for bookings within two months of travel.

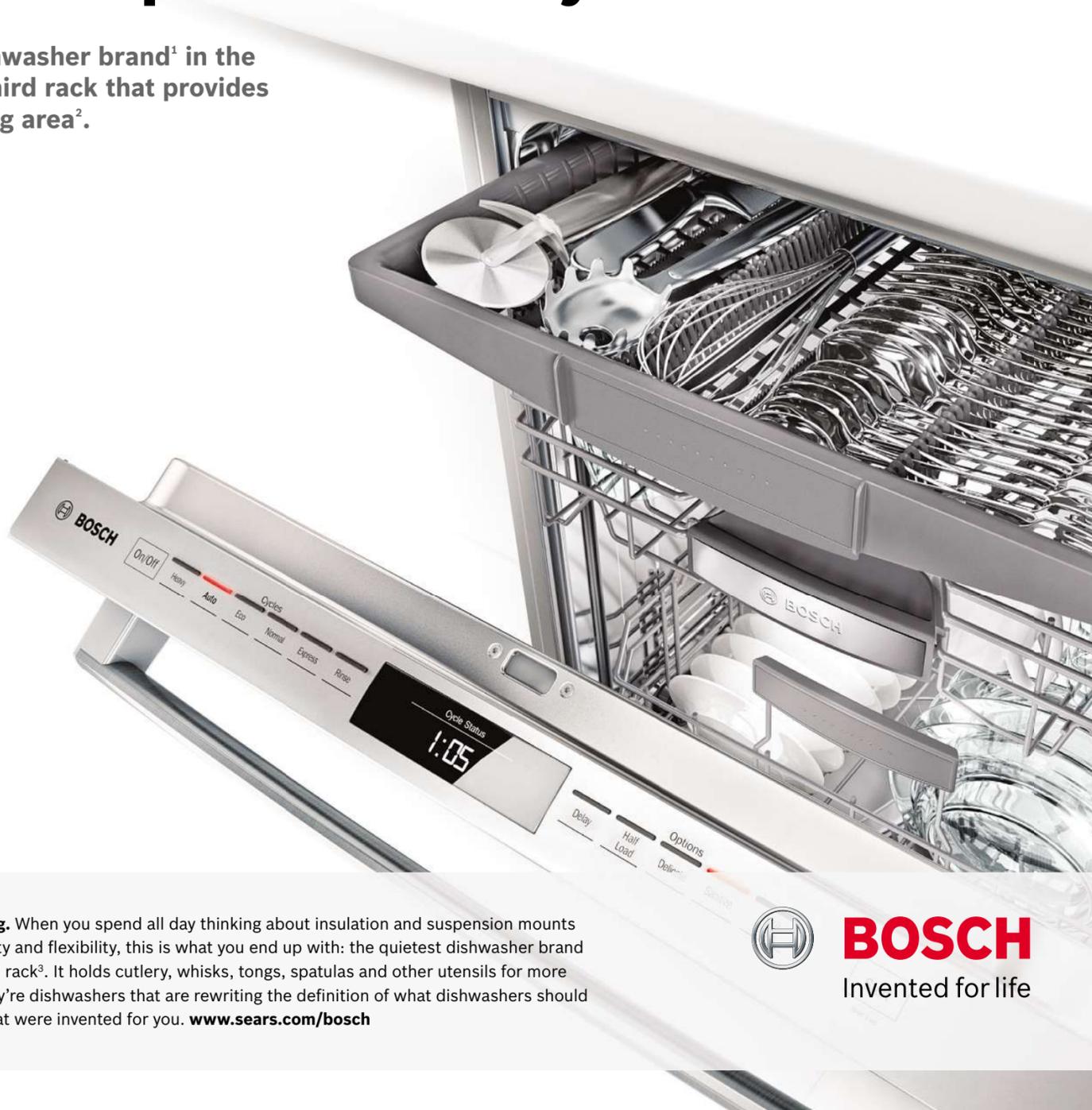
But travel agents warn that these deals are often cheap for a reason. The lowest prices tend to surface during hurricane season, for rooms that lack the best views, or at inconvenient times for families to travel.

Ms. Goldman, of Friendly Planet Travel, recommends that travelers check out the resort's website prices as a baseline before searching the Internet for deals.

She also suggests that travelers call the resort to confirm what's included in any special rate, and call the booking company to review its customer-satisfaction policy.

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