

One-Price Paradise

Is an all-inclusive vacation for you? *by Noel Hulsman*

THERE IS SOMETHING TREMENDOUSLY alluring, when you board a plane for Puerto Plata or Santo Domingo, to know there is a piña colada and a steak-and-shrimp smorgasbord awaiting your arrival. To know too that your room, meals, Pilates class and midday margaritas are also taken care of is the reason all-inclusives are one of the hottest holiday options on the market. Check out the travel section in next Saturday's paper: you will find 25 to 30 all-in-one packages for every air-only deal. All those ads, all those suppliers . . . it *has* to be the best way to go.

Yet, what if that piña colada is actually, technically, an extra – an extra that will cost you U.S.\$9.99, plus gratuities? And what if you find yourself stepping up and down in an aerobics class instead of jogging on a white-sand beach that is, in fact, a pebble-strewn spit? Your \$3,000 sojourn in the sun might not seem like paradise, after all. So how do you avoid the potential pitfalls inherent in any sight-unseen travel deal while reaping the benefits all-inclusives have to offer? Read on.



your counsellor, because sometimes an all-inclusive is still the best deal just for getting you to your destination (see next point). As well, a counsellor can ensure you're properly covered (insurance and otherwise) for life's little surprises, like that potential hurricane.

The lone wolf or part of the pack?

Don't presume a DIY vacation is the cheapest way to go. A no-frill seven-night all-in-one Varadero or Cancun package costs roughly \$1,500 to \$1,700 per person. If you wing it, you're looking at \$900 just for airfare. Assuming you're on a budget, you now have about \$85 a day to spend

on a room, meals, incidentals and activities. Can it be done? Certainly, but recognize you're soloing to preserve your independence and enhance the adventure factor, not necessarily to save money.

Be true to yourself

First, pick the right path. And to do that, you need to know thyself. Are you still young and responsibility-free, ready to backpack around the world? Or do you have little ones, and now pools, playgrounds and peace and quiet add up to your perfect getaway?

Figure out what it is you really want, *then* call your travel counsellor. All-inclusives today are increasingly specialized, and your travel counsellor can help you compare options and ensure that deal's the real deal. Sure, your room and meals will be included, but what about airport transfers and taxes, after-dinner cognacs and off-site excursions (which can quickly add up to a small fortune)? What if a hurricane heads your way?

What's all-included?

Right upfront, you need to know what's included. If your aim is to spend two weeks lounging on the beach, there's no point paying for a package that includes parasailing, scuba diving and local sightseeing expeditions. You'll simply be financing someone else's good times. In fact, if you're only interested in a bit of warm weather and the lack of a set itinerary doesn't affect your comfort level, paying as you go may be the smarter move. There's certainly no shortage of airlines, hotels and restaurants – ranging from five stars to a few pesos – ready to cater to your stint in the sun. And, of course, you can then design each day as you go. Then again, consult with

Bottom line: Choosing the right travel option always comes down to knowing who you are and what you need. Half-year rambles down the back roads of Asia can never be part of a packaged trip – nothing affordable at least. And if there are kids in tow, there's no way to light off to Mexico or the Caribbean lugging diapers and a stroller without knowing there are beds and a buffet breakfast – hopefully with Cheerios – waiting the next morning. At the end of the day, “know thyself” may be a cliché, but it's the best advice to take. ▣

catered versus carefree

All-in-one convenience or adventure and freedom? Either way, working through an experienced travel agent will help you get the vacation you want. For starters, see how the trip types stack up:

	ALL-INCLUSIVE	DIY
Budget Predictability	✓✓✓✓✓	✓
Built-in Extras (e.g., room, meals, drinks, activities, entertainment)	✓✓✓✓✓	
Peace of Mind/Safety	✓✓✓✓	✓✓
Adventure/Flexibility	✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓
Culture	✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓
Available Destinations	✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓ □