

A Good Deal More

Golf's 'on sale,' and the right tour operator can help you get the most for your money

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Crisis management Let's say something goes wrong -- a buddy misses a connection on the way, for example, or a golf course has no record of your reservation. Will you have a person dedicated to fixing these problems, or will you get whoever picks up the phone when you call in? It's worth asking.

A year after September 11, Dick Matullo made plans to try Ireland again. But several days before the trip, he got a call from his new tour operator, Debbie Bussey of Connecticut-based Absolutely Golf & Travel, who asked, "Are you sitting down?" She'd heard workers at Aer Lingus, the air-line they were flying, might strike later that week. Scrambling to find any available seats, Bussey re-booked Matullo and friends a day earlier on different airlines. Sure enough, the strike hit, and Matullo's original flights were canceled. "I ended up going through New York to Madrid and from there to Dublin, which wasn't on our original itinerary, but the whole thing went flawlessly," Matullo says. "Debbie coordinated guys coming in from Charlotte and New York, too, so we all got there at the same time. She got us a hotel in Dublin and booked a reservation at Bono's restaurant. She even sent our table a bottle of champagne at dinner that first night. It was amazing."

Financial stability The recession is hurting them all, but at a minimum you ought to pick a tour operator that has some history of weathering economic downturns.

The Green

It's all there in front of you at last: The itinerary of your dreams. But before you sign that contract, consider these key items:

Price changes Between the time you book your trip and actually hit the road, there's a good chance prices will have changed. Take a look at your tour operator's Terms & Conditions. Can it jack up the price on you before you make your final payment, or is the price locked in with your deposit? If it's not locked in, the price you've been quoted "is really just an estimate," says Sam Baker.

Along the same lines, some tour operators will charge a fee for even the smallest change in your plans. "I think that's just part of customer service," says Debbie Bussey, who does not charge extra for changes.

Cancellation policy What happens if you can't make the trip for some reason? With most tour operators, it depends on when you pull the plug. PerryGolf is fairly typical: It will keep your deposit, but you get a 100 percent refund on your final payment if you cancel more than 60 days before the arrival at your destination. That drops to 50 percent within 59 days and 25 percent within 29 days to 14 days. Cancel anytime after that and you get no refund. If you're concerned about having to swallow that kind of expense, consider buying trip-cancellation insurance, which will refund all your money in many situations.

Payment Some tour operators will let you pay your deposit by credit card but expect the balance by check. This saves them from paying the credit-card commission. As Dick Matullo found, this also significantly cuts your leverage in the event of a dispute. Two friends traveling with him on the Sept. 12, 2001, trip had paid their share by credit card. When the tour operator wouldn't refund their \$3,000, they appealed to their credit-card company, which recovered the full amount. The lesson: Pay by credit card.

"When we went to Ireland the following year, we took the trip we were going to take in 2001," says Matullo. "So I went to the general managers at the golf courses and hotels and asked how much the [other firm] paid the year before. To a man, they said, 'What?' It turns out he had just kept our money. I heard he went out of business. I've had it with him."

Looking at the bright side, Matullo has found a tour operator he loves. Debbie Bussey at Absolutely Golf has arranged two trips for him and his buddies, and they're planning to go again in 2010. "She takes the time to make things right," Matullo says. "Really, I'm so satisfied it's disgusting."