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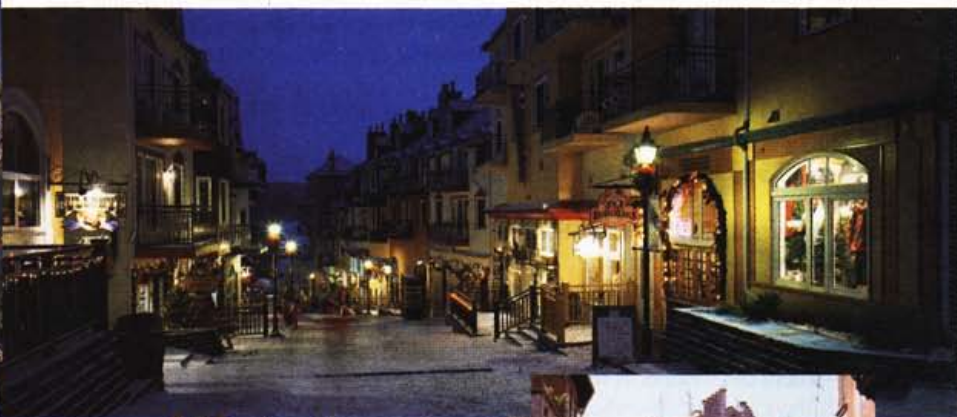


Europe Without Crowds

When It's Cold Here, Washingtonians

Like Europe and Canada—Plus Old

Favorites Like Las Vegas and the Islands



Clockwise from top: courtesy of Bluefields Villas; courtesy of Fairmont Tremblant; Mark BronzAlamy; courtesy of Halekulani Hotel

RAVEL AGENT GUIDO ADELFFIO SEES IT TIME AND AGAIN: couples coming into Bethesda Travel Center asking where to take a winter break.

"My first question is, 'What do you like to do?'"

At that point, Adelfio says, the husband usually says, "I like to ski" and the wife says, "I love the beach."

One answer? Europe.

"In my opinion, Europe is smart," Adelfio says. "It's cool but not cold. There are no crowds. It's relaxed. The airfares are ridiculous."

Or take a gamble on Las Vegas, where off-season airfares and hotel rates leave plenty to spare for the slots. (You'll find an insider's guide to Vegas on our Web site, www.washingtonian.com.)

"Las Vegas is huge," says Anne Scully of McCabe Bre-

Eleanor Berman is author of *Away for the Weekend: Mid-Atlantic*. Barbara Radin Fox, who lives in Kensington and has sailed with more than 25 cruise lines, is publisher of www.romantic-getaways.com. Sherri Dalphonse is *The Washingtonian's* travel editor. James T. Yenckel is a Washington travel writer.

Get your money's worth in Jamaica and Mont Tremblant. Venice is blissfully uncrowded; Hawaii's Halekulani is heaven.

mer Travel in McLean. "It's milder in winter. It's a good time to go."

Then there's Canada, where the skiing is first-rate but the prices are not. Or go west to Hawaii—it's not as hard a trip as you might think.

Want more bargains this winter?

Cruises offer not only value but ease. And instead of paying \$5,000 for a week at a sprawling Caribbean resort, try a villa—you get more for your money, including more charm.

Here are ideas for a winter vacation.

Smart Money

WINTER FARES TO EUROPE ARE UNBEATABLE—and so are the reasons to go.

This is when you can have a museum of great art almost to yourself, shop unjostled to your heart's content, and enjoy the height of the season at the theater, opera, and ballet.

In London, you can scoop up bargains on everything from teapots to cashmere at the legendary January sale at



Harrods, then take in Andrew Lloyd Webber's latest musical, *Bombay Dreams*, before it crosses the Atlantic.

Winter is the ideal time to see the Picassos and Matisse's at the new Tate Modern or to get a table at restaurants that have made London a newfound mecca for gourmands, including Alain Ducasse's latest venture, Spoon, in the Sanderson Hotel.

Through March 25, Virgin Atlantic is offering seven days and six nights in London starting at \$479 a person from Washington, including air, hotel, breakfast, and airport transfers. Call 888-937-8474 or see www.virgin.com/vacations.

For Francophiles, Air France's Web site is advertising Washington-to-Paris trips for as little as \$568 a person (\$379 from New York), including three hotel nights and breakfast. Call 800-2-FRANCE or see www.airfrance.com/us. The Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo are waiting at the Louvre, and there is no off-season for the city's cuisine and couture.

If London or Paris don't suit, what about Italy? You'll need your winter coat, but Venice is free of crowds, and you can get up close to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and other treasures at the Uffizi in Florence.

In Rome—where the weather is relatively mild, with days in the 50s—shops are packed with high fashion, and it's the one time of year you can see the Sistine Chapel without long lines. Tourcrafters winter packages to all three cities begin at \$769 from Washington including air, five nights in a hotel, and breakfast. Call 800-482-5995 or see www.tourcrafters.com.

Madrid is another winter winner. Nights can be chilly, but days are sunny and pleasant, ideal for exploring the old quarter or the fashionable shops on Calle Serrano. Goyas and other great art at the Prado and all those tapas bars add to the city's appeal. Through Petrabax Tours, a round-trip flight on Iberia and six nights in a four-star hotel cost \$694 a person. Call 800-634-1188 or see www.petrabaxusa.com.

—ELEANOR BERMAN

Smooth Sailing

THE BEST BARGAINS IN TRAVEL ARE cruises.

A recent ad for a five-night Royal Caribbean sailing listed rates starting at \$247 a person. For that, you get lodging, meals, nightly shows and other entertainment, and visits to the ports of Key West, Cozumel, and Costa Maya in Mexico.

Cruises come in all styles, from smaller sailing ships to grand ocean liners decked out with shops, bars, and casinos. Winter is a great time to look for bargains because cruise lines move their ships from summer

routes in Alaska and Europe to the sunnier waters south of the United States. The seasonal flood of ships means some great deals.

Here are a few recommended winter cruises. Fares quoted are brochure rates, but discounts are almost always available in nonholiday periods.

■ Windstar Cruises' *Wind Surf*—an elegant ship with billowing, computer-operated sails—has seven-day voyages between Barbados and St. Thomas with visits to such ports as Bequia, Mayreau, Dominica, St. Barthelemy, St. Lucia, Grenada, and Virgin Gorda. Fares start at \$1,857.

■ If you want nonstop action on a large ship, sail on one of Carnival Cruise Line's Fun Ships. Carnival, which dominates the industry, lists specials on its Web site, www.carnival.com. Recent offerings included

Many villas are set on bluffs, and the views are stunning. From our villa's four-poster bed and mahogany rockers we could see out to lush foliage and the blue-green Caribbean sea.

seven-day Caribbean cruises from \$499 and seven-day Mexico Riviera voyages for \$549.

■ For something more exotic, consider Radisson Seven Seas' *Paul Gauguin*, which sails from Tahiti to other South Pacific islands including Bora Bora and Moorea. Seven-night cruises start at \$3,150 a person.

—BARBARA RADIN FOX

Private Paradise

MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE LOVED Grenada, Anguilla, and the few other Caribbean islands we've visited, but any island dreaming these days is tempered by a cold splash of reality: Caribbean prices.

A room at a top resort can start at \$500 a night, without food. We've found lodging for less, then had our beach towels trampled by spring-breakers. Restaurants are overpriced, too.

We had given up on the Caribbean. Then we tried villa rentals. Not only can villas be a better value, especially if you're traveling with friends, but they can offer privacy and service that resorts can't match.

Our favorite so far: Villas at Bluefields Bay in Jamaica.

The five houses that make up the Villas at Bluefields Bay, on the southern coast an hour from Montego Bay, aren't cheap. The least expensive, the two-bedroom Cottonwood Cottage we stayed in, rents for \$2,800 to \$4,600 a week, plus a 15-percent tip. But, oh, what that price includes: three meals a day for up to four people, open bar, and a full staff, including a chef, butler, and maid/laundress.

Before arriving, we had been asked about foods we liked, but the meals were beyond our expectations. Delicious ginger lobster, fresh snapper, corn fritters, jerk chicken, coconut cream pie—all served on bone china, with lace tablecloths and crystal. And it was nice not having to decide where to eat each night.

Many of the villas are set on bluffs, and the views are stunning. From our bedroom's four-poster bed and mahogany rockers—the villas are styled like Jamaica's old great houses—we could see out to lush foliage and the blue-green sea.

It was paradise, but not perfect. I would have liked stronger water pressure, newer towels, and a wider, less rocky beach. (Pack water shoes.) But you forget all that when you descend a short staircase to the beach to find that your attendant has strung up a hammock under the palm trees and set out chairs, towels, and cold drinks. I read two books in five days.

Kayaks, a tennis court, snorkeling, and a modern spa down the road all tempt, but this is a place to relax, be pampered, and soak in Jamaica's beauty. Unlike at big hotels full of American tourists, you won't feel like you could be in Florida. The papayas and pineapples at breakfast were fresh, not flown in.

Cottonwood is the only villa at Bluefields without its own pool. Two-bedroom Milestone Cottage, which can sleep four, is popular with honeymooners (\$3,400 to \$5,400). The Hermitage (up to eight people, \$4,900 to \$10,800) and San Michele (up to 12 guests, \$4,900 to \$12,000) are good for groups.

Another plus: We left BWI on an 8:30 AM flight and were at our villa by lunch. It's hard to get to paradise faster than that.

For more information on the Villas at Bluefields Bay, contact 202-232-4010 or see www.bluefieldsvillas.com.

—SHERRI DALPHONSE

Hawaii's Siren Call

THE CARIBBEAN IS SO CLOSE, YET HAWAII beckons despite the 12-hour flight. Why is it such a popular destination for Washingtonians?

You might be surprised that by departing from Dulles at 7:20 AM, you can be on

Waikiki Beach in time for a late lunch.

Hawaii's appeal is simple: This is the tropics of your dreams, an Americanized version of the Caribbean without potholed roads and spotty service. And it's as beautiful as you imagined.

Though frequently jam-packed, Waikiki remains one of Hawaii's best beaches. In recent years, the area has undergone a ren-

aissance, becoming a hip spot for the party crowds. But it's also a great base to explore the rest of Oahu, especially Honolulu's rich art, cultural, and history museums. The Bishop Museum holds one of the finest collections of Polynesian artifacts. I love the Halekulani Hotel (800-367-2343; starts at \$325 a night per couple), where I've sipped mai tais in the beachfront garden to a

ukulele serenade.

If you enjoy golf and tennis, head for the resort-draped island of Maui. Among the best by the beach is the Grand Wailea Resort (800-888-6100; \$450 and up). From there you can drive the famed Hana Highway, a narrow lane carrying you back into old Hawaii.

Sightseers might prefer the Big Island of

Play in the Snow

Resorts Offer Lower Prices in Winter But Also Lots of Fun—From Skiing and Skating to Indoor Tennis and Massage By **ANN COCHRAN**

YOU DON'T HAVE TO FLY TO THE CARIBBEAN or Canada for winter fun. Mid-Atlantic resorts have plenty going for them—at attractive prices. A sampling:

Downhill Fun

Skiing magazine called **Wintergreen Resort** "the South's single best ski area." Along with skiing—including adaptive skiing for people with disabilities—the Virginia resort has snowboarding, snow tubing, and an all-year adventure center with a bungee-trampoline, rock-climbing tower, and skateboarding.

Wintergreen's spa is not the most luxurious, but it has talented massage therapists, a steam room, a sauna, an indoor pool, and a fitness center. Indoor tennis is nearby.

Wintergreen is three hours away. Call 800-266-2444 or see www.wintergreenresort.com.

Tea Time, Ski Time

At the **Homestead**, a gracious oasis in Virginia's Allegheny Mountains, guests can sit by the fire in the Great Hall for tea, enjoy a horse-drawn carriage ride, or strap on skis—the resort has snowmaking equipment. There are snowboarding runs, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, snowmobile tours, and an Olympic-size skating rink.

The Homestead is four hours away; 800-838-1766 or www.thehomestead.com.

Up-and-Comer

Families roast marshmallows, sing, and stargaze around the fire pit at **Glade Springs**, an up-and-coming West Virginia mountain resort. Guests can ski seven miles away at Winterplace Ski Resort. Joint ownership makes packages possible; the best is a mid-week \$99 room rate and two lift tickets.

Glade Springs is five hours from DC. Call 800-634-5233 or see www.gladespringsresort.com; www.winterplace.com.

Alone With History

Winter is mild and tourists are scarce in **Colonial Williamsburg** once its remarkable holiday decorations are packed away. History lovers can have the attractions and docents almost to themselves.

Williamsburg is 3½ hours away. Call 800-HISTORY or see www.history.org.

Near But Far

Lansdowne Resort, Washington's closest resort, offers winter packages, a quality spa, cooking classes, and two extremes of shop-

ping. Nearby Leesburg Corner Premium Outlets is a sprawling complex that includes Burberry and Pottery Barn, while antiques abound in picturesque Leesburg.

Lansdowne is near Dulles International Airport. Call 800-541-4801 or 703-729-8400; visit www.lansdowneresort.com.

Snuggle Up

There are no winter sports at **Keswick Hall** unless you count winetasting in front of a fire. This spot, made for romance, was named one of the "world's best places to stay" by *Condé Nast Traveler*.

The Tuscan-style villa at the foot of the Blue Ridge has a decor reflective of 19th-century American affluence. Nearby Charlottesville boasts restaurants, galleries, museums, and shops.

Keswick Hall is 2½ hours away. Call 800-274-5391 or see www.keswick.com.

Golf, Anyone?

Winter activities are not the strength of the **Greenbrier**. But if you've always wanted to visit this West Virginia resort, take advantage of the season. Normally \$300 a person a day, rates drop to about \$200 a person, double occupancy, including breakfast and dinner.

In addition to sleigh rides and indoor tennis and swimming, you can tour a once-secret national-security bunker. If weather permits, one golf course is open and free from January through March 15.

The Greenbrier is 4¼ hours away. Call 800-453-4858 or see www.greenbrier.com.

Winter Wonderland

At **Nemacolin Woodlands Resort & Spa**, southeast of Pittsburgh, you can sleep in a chateau where water flows out of faucets in a crystal pattern and where art—from sculpture to antique cars—is everywhere.

Nemacolin offers downhill skiing, snowboarding, and tubing. For children ages 4 through 12, the Kidz Sleep, Eat & Ski Free program is available January through March.

Spa lovers know no season. At the resort's serene spa, Far Eastern-inspired de-

sign and treatments soothe body and soul. Nemacolin is 3½ hours away. Call 800-422-2736 or see www.nwlr.com.

Northern Lights

Until January 1, more than a million lights transform **Hershey**, Pennsylvania, into a holiday fantasy.

Winter is a good time to indulge in a whipped-cocoa bath or a chocolate-fondue wrap at the Spa at the Hotel Hershey. For active types, the castlelike hotel also has cross-country-ski rentals and trails.

Or stay in Hershey Lodge, with its four-sided fieldstone fireplace and chocolate-colored lobby furniture.

Hershey is two hours away; 800-HERSHEY or www.hersheypa.com.

Cool Deals

The highest mountain valley east of the Rockies is Canaan Valley, West Virginia. At family-focused **Canaan Valley Resort**, guests enjoy a 360-degree view of mountains.

If you have a few days free before Christmas, you can get two nights' lodging and two days of lift tickets and breakfast for \$109 a person (double occupancy).

In January and February (holidays excluded), a three-night weekend deal is \$249.

Downhill skiers choose from 34 slopes. Other activities include snowboarding, cross-country skiing, skating, and tubing. The Beech Club has an indoor pool, exercise room, whirlpool, and saunas.

Canaan Valley is 3½ hours away; try 800-622-4121 or www.canaanresort.com.

Family Affair

Wisp at Deep Creek Mountain Resort, on Western Maryland's Allegheny range, has 22 ski trails plus snowboarding, tubing, and ski and snowboard schools for everyone—some for kids, some women-only.

Wisp's trails tend to be uncrowded, and there's plenty for beginners. Weekend packages that include lodging, breakfast, and lift tickets start at \$474 for two adults.

Wisp is three hours away; try 800-462-9477 or www.skiwisp.com.



After cross-country skiing, warm up by a fire—or at the spa—at Hershey.

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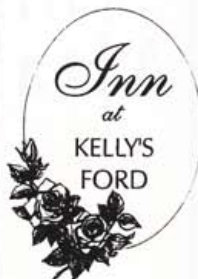
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Please send me the following travel information:

- Inn at Kelly's Ford - VA
- Patrick Henry - VA
- Wisp at Deep Creek Mountain Resort - MD

For more information on our travel directory section, contact the Advertising Department at 202-296-1246.

Name _____

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Hawaii, my favorite. There's room to roam and so much to see: the waterfalls of rain-drenched Hilo, an erupting volcano at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, coffee plantations, a macadamia farm, and Polynesian historical sites. The Kona Village Resort (800-637-5290; \$505 to \$895, including three meals a day), created in native-village style on the island's sunny side, wraps the whole family in Hawaiian culture.

Not all accommodations are expensive. A travel agent or Internet search can uncover condo rentals or hotel packages. You can find nice hotels a block or two from the beach for \$125 a night. That's another difference from the Caribbean.

For more information, contact the Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau, 808-923-1811 or www.gohawaii.com.

—JAMES T. YENCKEL

Canadian Cool

A SOFT CANADIAN DOLLAR MEANS THE price is right for a getaway to the frosty north.

Does the idea send shivers down your spine? French-flavored Montréal and its nearby ski resort of Tremblant can warm spirit and body. Air Canada flies nonstop from Reagan National to Montréal's Dorval International Airport in 90 minutes; Mont Tremblant's slopes are a 90-minute drive.

In cold country, the best tactic is frequent coffee breaks. Every block of Montréal's grand boulevards sports an inviting cafe or boulangerie piled high with pastries. Stay warm by touring the compact Underground City—passageways linking shopping malls, restaurants, and attractions. Skylights give the corridors an open feel.

Check out the Museum of Fine Arts on Rue Sherbrooke, the most fashionable street. Take in Boulevard Saint-Laurent and Rue Saint-Denis, parallel streets near McGill University that are lined with funky shops. I stay at Lowes Hôtel Vogue (800-465-6654; around \$200 US), close to everything.

Mont Tremblant, once fading, now rates as the East's best skiing thanks to big-money improvements. I'm charmed by the place. Its 18th-century-style village is an alpine fairy tale. Cobblestone streets wind among bakeries, bistros, and offbeat shops. It would be tempting to play hooky from the mountain if the runs weren't so exciting.

Ice-skate on little Lake Miroir. Cross-country ski on woodland trails. Accommodations in castlelike Chateau Mont Tremblant (800-441-1414; \$184 to \$330 US) overlook village and slopes.

For details, contact Quebec Tourism, 877-266-5687 or www.bonjourquebec.com.

—JAMES T. YENCKEL