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Poor economy doesn't mean your vacation is down the drain

By Jacky Runice

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With the economy on a slow flush to the water reclamation district, vacations might be one of the leisure things families trim this year. Sharp tour operators, resorts and hotels are doing a little trimming of their own so you won't have to purge this pleasurable part of family life.

A 38 percent discount on rates for kids (from last year's rates) might be the impetus to consider a Yellowstone multi-sport family adventure via the Montana-based adventure-travel company Zephyr Adventures. Owner Allan Wright realized organized family tours can be so terrific he didn't want to restrict them to higher-income families only.

So Zephyr Adventures dropped prices for kids and, in some cases, for adults. The five-day Yellowstone Multisport Adventure, priced last year at \$1,600 per person, costs \$1,400 for adults and \$1,000 for kids staying in the same room. How can he be so magnanimous and offer Yellowstone tours priced from \$600 to \$1,700 less per child than competitors' tours?

The company, based near its Family Adventure destinations just outside of Yellowstone, focuses on remaining small and has drastically reduced overhead by going "virtual" with all employees working from a home office.

Zephyr's family trips include activities such as river rafting, horseback riding, hiking, canoeing and wildlife watching while guests enjoy historic national park lodging, expert guides and yummy meals. Kids are attended by professional guides and parents are free to participate with their kids or spend some time with other adults. Take a look at www.ZephyrAdventures.com or call (888) 758-8687.

Think you'll have to overlook Orlando this year? Maybe not if you choose to lodge at Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate where spring and summer rates will dip. Stay three or more nights between May 22 and Sept. 27 and save 20 percent with the ChampionsGate Three or More Rate starting at \$191 per night (per room, per night, based on double occupancy; subject to change).

The resort offers a respite from the frenzy of theme-park touring with poolside cabanas, zero-entry family pool, aquatic playground, 850-foot Lazy River, two Greg Norman-designed golf courses and a full-service European Spa.

For more information on the ChampionsGate Three or More Rate, call Omni Orlando Resort at ChampionsGate at (800) 843-6664 or check out www.omniorlandoressort.com.

Expect Kids Stay Free deals to be popping up like dandelions as soon as the weather warms. For example, Occidental Hotels & Resorts is offering a kids-free deal at all Occidental Allegro properties for travel between May and December this year. That

represents a savings of \$53; \$73 per child per night. Call (800) 858-2258 or visit www.occidentalhotels.com/allegro.

The properties are in Mexico (Allegro Cozumel, Allegro Nuevo Vallarta, Allegro Playacar), Costa Rica (Allegro Papagayo) and the Dominican Republic (Allegro Playa Dorada).

Viva Wyndham Resorts usually offers its Kids Stay Free program for two months, but this year it's extended from June 1 to Aug. 31. Kids 12 and younger stay free at any of Viva Wyndham's eight resorts, including the recently renovated Grand Bahama Island property. Because it's all inclusive, your little travelers enjoy room, food, drinks, activities and nightly entertainment gratis as well as fun in the Kid's Club and Junior's Club.

Properties on the relatively undiscovered Caribbean island of Curacao are offering savings with kids eligible to stay free during summer months. Kids stay free at the Habitat Curacao Resort May 31 through Aug. 23; at Sunset Waters Resort in July and August; and at Breezes Curacao from May 1 to Dec. 22. Surf over to www.curacao.com or call (800) 328-7222 for details and a free destination DVD.

As tight as your budget gets, you know there are always others who feel greater pain. How would you like to snag a great family vacation deal as well as support a meaningful nonprofit cause?

Take a look at BiddingForGood.com (www.biddingforgood.com) to shop for travel packages, some at bargain prices, while helping to buy school textbooks, protect coral reefs or research disease. Charities post their auction items, rich in travel packages, and you bid.

At the moment, some of the auctions that might work for families include a week-long stay in a Destin, Fla., one-bedroom/one-bathroom condo that sleeps six. (Starting bid is \$400, but it's worth \$1,080.) Proceeds from the condo stay will benefit the baseball team at Tallahassee's Chiles High School. A San Diego Zoo Family Fun Getaway package includes a family four pack to the Birch Aquarium at Scripps, LEGOLAND and the San Diego Wild Animal Park plus a stay at the Residence Inn, Oceanside (which has a dining room area and fully equipped kitchen and complimentary breakfast buffet) and a \$50 dining gift certificate good at a San Diego pizza place. Starting bid is \$220, but it's worth \$850. Proceeds from this auction go toward the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

It's easy to participate. Just type "travel" into the search file on www.biddingforgood.com or search by geographic location or charity.