

Travel

Bad weather leads to a great escape

The cold has got Brits hunting bargain breaks in the sun writes
Jeremy Gates

A GRIM winter could work wonders for winter and summer holiday bookings because so many Britons want a break from the daily grind, according to tour operators and travel agents.

Bookings for holidays to escape this current cold snap are already up 55% year-on-year, says travel website lowcostholidays.com.

It claims searches for winter sun holidays are up 108% with the Canary Islands, Malta and Portugal's Algarve coast among the top destinations.

Other destinations in popular demand include Egypt, Madeira, Florida, Mexico and Barbados.

Europe city breaks are going at knockdown prices too, thanks to low hotel prices and budget airline flights.

Lowcostholidays currently offers two nights' B&B in Amsterdam from £95, with return flights ex-Southend on January 8, and two nights' B&B in Rome from £86, with return flights ex-Stansted on January 10.

The website says holidaymakers increasingly use mobile devices and iPads to book holidays, with iPads driving a huge volume of visits – up 1,127% year-on-year.

Matt Hall, deputy MD at lowcostholidays.com, says: "The sharp temperature drop has created a surge in searches and bookings for winter sun holidays.

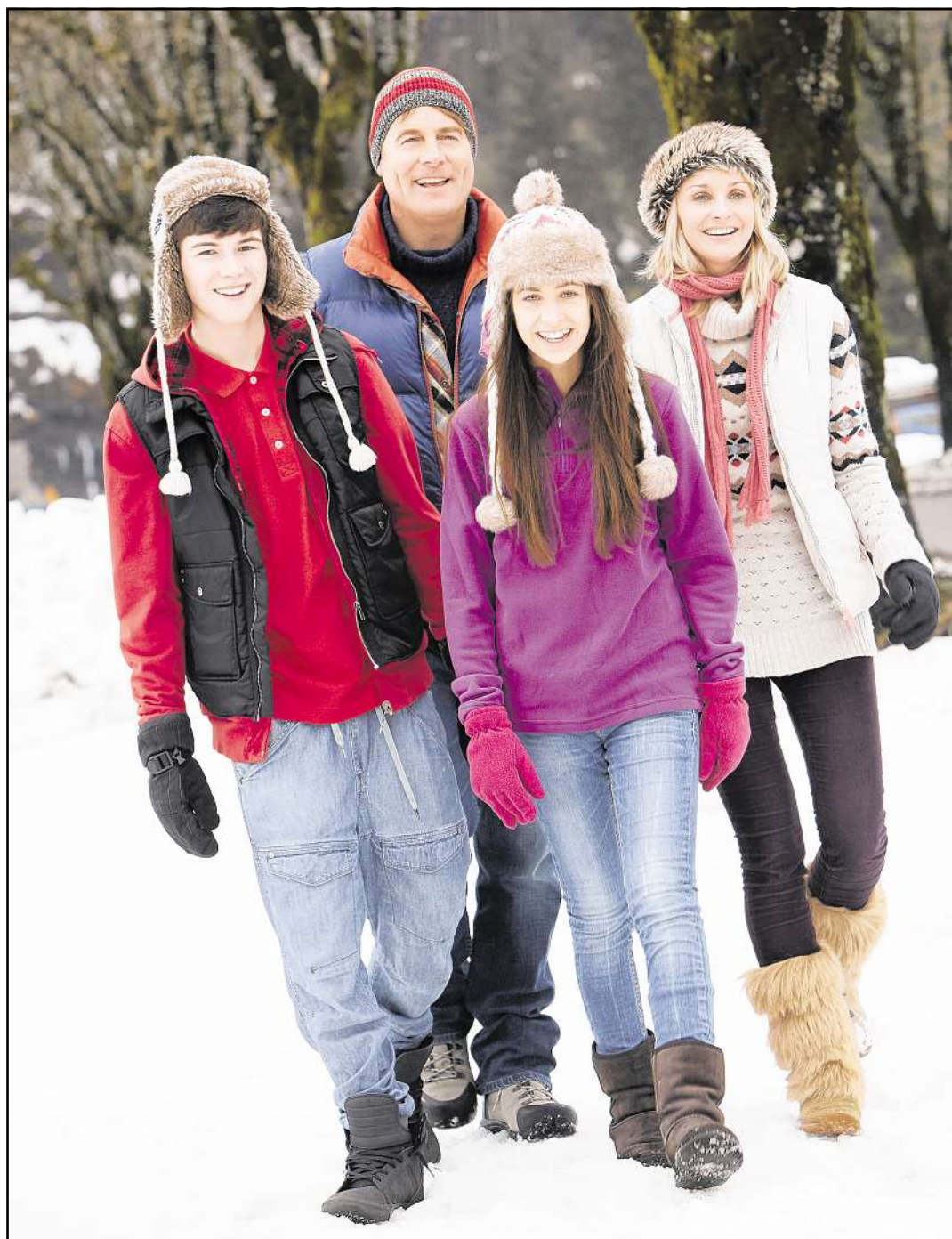
"With more cold weather possibly on the way, customers are rushing online to grab late sunshine escapes. Many still want to get away for Christmas and New Year, so Christmas holiday searches are up 126% year-on-year."

City breaks are also up 85%, with warmer temperatures making Marrakech a hugely popular choice.

December deals from lowcostholidays.com include seven nights' self-catering in a Malta hotel from £99, and seven nights at a four-star Florida hotel from £589, both including flights.

Operators and travel agents also sound bullish about summer 2013 – but here a different dynamic may be at work.

Peter Long, chief executive at Tui Travel (Thomson) confirms a resurgence in demand for all-inclusive packages, because families want to know exactly how much they will spend on food, drink and accommodation



TAKE ADVANTAGE: Families are jetting off for some winter fun, and planning ahead for summer, to get away from our wash-out weather

when they book.

Many customers are also booking because they have grim memories of poor summer weather at home in 2012.

John McEwan, chief executive of the Advantage chain of travel agents, claims bookings are up in excess of 10% year-on-year, while Alistair Rowland at Midcounties Co-operative Travel claims to be 10% up on summer bookings and 5% up for winter sales.

He says: "Things are improving a bit with the economy, the number of people unemployed is declining and together with low inflation, it's all having an impact in encouraging people to book."

Travel Counsellors, a chain of home-based travel experts,

claims a 6% jump in summer bookings, and a surge of 11% in winter bookings.

Agents say that a shortage of short-haul holiday capacity in 2012 meant many people didn't get the destination or accommodation they wanted, particularly if they booked late when Britain's summer fell to pieces.

Meanwhile, Travelzoo claims that despite the economic gloom, many consumers plan to spend more on travel in 2013.

Its survey found the number of consumers budgeting £900 or more per person on holidays is up by 10% year-on-year.

In a clear sign that the travel industry is on the mend, the number of people budgeting £900-£1,499 per person on their

next winter trip has increased against last year, and stands at 16%.

The research also revealed that 71% of consumers plan to take three or more holidays in 2013 – positive news for the travel industry – and identified a growing trend for consumers to be deal-driven rather than basing holidays around peak travel periods.

While summer remains a popular time to travel, 41% of consumers also say they are open to holidaying at different times of the year. With travel firms keen to get early bookings, 39% of respondents say they will book in advance for a brilliant deal.

◆ www.lowcostholidays.com, 0800 111 6271

Road trip with plenty to see

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wine bar and a demonstration kitchen where Milwaukee's finest chefs share their secrets.

No road trip would be complete without a chance to rev up our engines at the spectacular Harley-Davidson museum, the attraction that celebrates the rich history of the bikes and the passion of the riders. It houses **Elvis Presley's** first motorcycle in a gallery of famous Harleys, as well as one of every model ever made.

This is Great Lakes country, where America meets Canada. Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan, Superior: Each one a different inland sea, hundreds of miles across. As we carried on our journey we travelled along the banks of Lake Michigan up to Sheboygan (www.visitsheboygan.com), which surfers call the "Malibu of the Midwest".

When the winds blow incredible, rideable waves are sculpted from the surface water.

Next stop was Green Bay (www.greenbay.com), home of the Green Bay Packers football team.

A city with a population of 100,000, it is by far the smallest metropolitan area in the USA to host a major professional sports franchise. Its stadium, Lambeau Field, seats 73,000 fans and on game days the tiny city turns into a sea of green and yellow.

The ground itself is well worth a visit (www.packers.com) – the guides had bags of enthusiasm and explained the whole game to us as we walked around the stadium and Packers Hall of Fame.

Like Milwaukee, it's beer country. We went for dinner at Hinterland Brewery & Restaurant (www.hinterlandbeer.com). It's an excellent craft brewery and a restaurant that specialises in locally-raised and locally grown food, alongside artisan-made beer.

From Green Bay we left Lake Michigan and travelled west, driving across the stunning mid-west countryside, climbing up to the mountains, enjoying the clean air and wide open spaces.

Rib Mountain State

Park is well worth a visit. We went to enjoy the Comet Sky Ride fall colour chairlift ride to see the best of the autumn leaves, before visiting the 60 ft. observation tower. It's a great place to visit all year round, with excellent walking trails for the spring and summer, and skiing in the winter.

Back on the road again we stopped for the night in Eau Claire (visiteauclaire.com).

It's home to Carson Park, a football stadium, a historic baseball stadium and a softball field. Eau Claire is also the official Kubb capital of North America.

We had to have a game – it's basically like bowling meets croquet, and the object is to knock over wooden blocks by throwing wooden sticks at them. It comes from Scandinavia – like many of the traditions in this part of Wisconsin. There's a definite northern European feeling to the place, from the beer to the style of architecture.

We drove through more chocolate-box mid-west towns, with pretty little houses behind white picket fences. We crossed the state border in to Minnesota and stopped off for lunch at Red Wing (www.redwing.org), home of the Red Wing shoe and the beautiful pottery. It's a fantastic little town and well worth a visit.

Our shopping appetites whetted, we drove on to Minneapolis and its Mall of America. With 4.2 million-square feet of shopping space inside, and clothing offered tax-free, it's a must see stop off. We spent hours in its fantastic Macy's, Hollister and Bath and Body Works, stocking up on treats to take home, before a really good dinner at Napa Valley Grille (www.napa-valleygrille.com/bloomington).

As we prepared to fly home from Minneapolis, we reflected on a fantastic road trip, picking up plenty of souvenirs on the way. It was a trip of a lifetime, giving us a glimpse into another culture. I only wish I'd planned ahead and brought a spare (empty) suitcase. This is definitely one of those trips where you need to book excess baggage.