

TRAVEL

Choosing a Vacation Mystery Trip

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THE GETAWAY

Instead of choosing your next vacation destination, what if it was a surprise?

Travel agencies, tour companies and airlines — **Priceline**, **Hotwire**, **Virgin Australia**, **Air New Zealand**, **Germanwings** — have long offered discounted hotel rooms, car rentals and flights to travelers willing to roll the dice and learn what they're getting only after they pay, like slipping a quarter into a vending machine for a mystery toy in a capsule. And local tour companies such as **Voyages Traditours** in Canada and **Magical Mystery Tours** in Washington, D.C., have for years been creating itineraries for travelers who don't want to know where they're vacationing until the 11th hour.

That list has grown over the last year thanks to a new crop of "surprise" services from travel companies as varied as **CheapCaribbean.com**, **KLM Royal Dutch Airlines** and **Brown & Hudson**, a London-based agency.

In some cases travelers are allowed to pick their destination, but the hotel is a surprise. In others, the destination is a surprise until a few days before departure, then travelers can choose a hotel. The most elaborate services ask clients questions about their passions and then design personalized surprise itineraries including flights, hotels and activities,

based on their responses.

CheapCaribbean.com, which specializes in bargains to Mexico and the Bahamas, as well as the Caribbean, last year introduced a program — Seas the Deal, since renamed Deal of Fortune — that allows travelers to book rooms in upscale, all-inclusive properties for less. Travelers can choose the place they wish to go (such as Jamaica, Mexico, the Dominican Republic), but the hotel is a surprise (it's revealed a week before the trip).

For instance, a recent search turned up a four-night trip to the Riviera Maya in Mexico, including airfare and lodging, starting at \$699 a person based on double occupancy. For each Deal of Fortune search result, CheapCaribbean.com provides a short list of potential hotels, one of which will end up being yours. For the \$699 Mexico deal, possible hotels included Dreams Puerto Aventuras Resort & Spa; Iberostar Paraiso Lindo; Azul Beach Hotel, by Karisma; or Barcelo Maya Palace Deluxe.

Deal of Fortune trips have appealed to travelers of all ages, yet the people who are most interested are cost-conscious, spontaneous and flexible, according to Sophia Stoller, a spokeswoman for CheapCaribbean.com.

In its 2015 “travel vanguard” feature, *Afar*, the travel magazine and trip-planning site, called surprise travel “the new luxury” (although it's not a new practice) and highlighted the Brown & Hudson travel agency. Last year the company posted details on its website about “a journey where even you will not know where you are going.”

“When we first started exploring this idea and talking about it with clients, we didn't talk about surprise travel because it felt too faddy,” Philippe Brown, a founder of Brown & Hudson, said in an email. Instead, he calls his concept “A Journey With No Destination.” The tagline: “Sometimes you're better off not knowing where you're going.”

Last month, the company announced that its nascent offering “shifts the emphasis from the ‘where’ of travel to ‘why.’ ” Mr. Brown said that often

the only thing clients talk about is how they hope to feel after a trip. “They tell us about family challenges, or exhaustion, a need for inspiration, relationship issues,” he said.

By focusing on why you are traveling instead of where, Mr. Brown said, travel can play a therapeutic role. To determine what sort of vacation might accomplish that, Brown & Hudson asks big-picture questions about your personal development goals and how you want to feel when you return home. Additionally, the company asks where you’ve already traveled and, as the website put it: “anywhere or anything you definitely don’t want to do and how risky or intrepid you dare to be.”

The destination may be revealed when you check in at the airport or, if you’re flying privately, not until you arrive. And while travelers don’t know where they’re going, Brown & Hudson ensures they know what to bring.

Most of the clients for whom Brown & Hudson designs such trips are experienced travelers, though there are exceptions, like the honeymoon couple that thought it would be an interesting way to begin their marriage. Mr. Brown said the idea appeals to millennials, who tend to want the unusual, unexpected and unique, as well as to older clients seeking different ways to see places they have already been.

Brown & Hudson is a luxury agency, and there’s a nonrefundable trip-planning fee, usually a minimum of 1,500 British pounds (about \$2,300). But the total price varies greatly depending on factors including where you’re going and for how long, and what you’ll be doing. Travelers can establish a budget in advance, though, so there are no surprises in that regard.

Also last year, KLM, the Dutch airline, joined the ranks of carriers offering blind getaways with its Monday’s Mystery tickets starting at 99 euros (about \$106) round-trip. Each Monday, for a period of three weeks, the airline featured five destinations on its website, one of which would end up being your weekend trip. So you would buy a blind ticket on Monday, find out where you’re going on Tuesday and fly there on Friday.

If history is any indication, the latest surprise travel offerings are unlikely to spark a sweeping trend. Start-ups as well as major brands that dabbled in mystery travel a few years ago are no longer offering the services. Delta Air Lines used to have “mystery deals” on hotel rooms on its website. Gone too is Nextpedition from American Express, which created surprise itineraries.

Perhaps it’s not surprising. A vacation is not a toy in a vending machine — it’s an expense, one that many travelers deem too big to relinquish control of. Besides, for some people, planning is part of the fun. Social scientists say that the sort of activities involved in organizing and anticipating a trip — looking at beautiful photos of your destination, reading about it, watching films made there — can help boost your happiness.

If you would prefer to choose your own vacation, you can still inject an element of surprise into the planning process with websites and apps like Google Flights and Booking.com. Rather than pick your destination and then look for flights, you can let your destination reveal itself by searching Google Flights for desirable criteria such as affordable business class fares to Europe, or select the “places travelers love” link on Booking.com and then discover destinations by interest such as “nature” or “friendly people.” Or you can simply do what travelers have done for ages: Spin a globe.