

Cheap flights deal frenzy for holidaymakers

FREE air tickets, \$1 Mediterranean cruises, two-for-one deals and gifts such as digital cameras and MP3 players. Travel companies are offering some amazing deals as the recession bites and it's cash-strapped holidaymakers who are reaping the benefits. In the latest bid to fill seats Tiger Airways will offer 30,000 free fares online. The freebies apply to flights between June 1 and September 30, although the Sydney-to-Melbourne service doesn't begin until July 3.

Passengers, however, will need to pay airport charges and GST, about \$25 one way for the Sydney flights.

The impact of the economic slowdown has also led to specials such as \$1 Mediterranean cruises, flights to Bali from \$279 and \$159 fares to Europe when booked with a coach tour. Travel.com.au general manager Helen Demetriou said prices and deals were more tempting than those created after the September 11 bombings, SARS, the Asian bird flu scare and the outbreak of the Iraq War. She urged Australians planning to travel over-

seas this year to book now as the airlines "are using tactical sales techniques to win butts on seats".

"Whether it is international or domestic travel, now is the time to start researching and booking as airlines are slashing their fares up to 40 per cent on popular routes," she said. Illawong mother of two Barbara Phillips couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the holiday specials. "Because of the economic climate we thought of not going anywhere," she said. "But that quickly changed. "While my husband was away on business I thought, 'Why not?'. "We surfed the internet and found a great online special. "Now are are off to Penang (Malaysia) for a family holiday of shopping, swimming and sightseeing.

"We have not been there before and the kids are as excited as we are."

Mrs Phillips, husband Peter and sons Harrison, 10, and Jack, 6, will pack for a holiday that cost a nudge over \$5000. "We looked at the USA but the poor value of our dollar put us off," she said. "We looked at Bintang

(Indonesia), but the Malaysia deal was hard to beat. "The holiday will cost the entire family \$5100 and that includes airfares, seven nights in Penang, three nights in Kuala Lumpur, transfers and travel insurance. And breakfasts are also included for all of us. That leaves a bit of change for shopping."

A Cronulla family of six has saved 50 per cent on a holiday to Greece. "In March we were quoted \$18,000 for air fares to Athens," said Liz Ikonomidis, who with her husband George, three teenage children and mother-in-law, will fly out in July. "After shopping around we were able to book the flights with Emirates for a little less than \$9500 - and that's for a holiday during the peak season.

"With the savings we are going to book a cruise of the Greek islands along with a number of other additions."

Despite the budget holiday boom, the local tourism industry, which employs more than 500,000 people, will decline this year as tourist numbers to Australia are predicted to fall by at least 250,000 - a loss of about \$1 billion.



Acropolis museum to open in June: minister

ATHENS (AFP) — The ultra-modern Acropolis museum, situated below the ancient landmark that defines the Greek capital Athens, will belatedly open in June, Greek Culture Minister Antonis Samaras said Sunday.

"We are preparing a jewel of a museum whose opening on June 20 will be a major, global event," said Samaras after giving European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso a guided tour of the venue.

The three-level museum, with a total area of 25,000 square metres (270,000 square feet), includes a section reserved for the disputed Parthenon Marbles, currently at the British Museum in London.

Greece is pursuing a campaign for the return of the priceless friezes, removed in 1806 by Lord Elgin when Greece was occupied by the Ottoman Empire, which the British Museum refuses to repatriate.

Designed by Franco-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, the Acropolis museum was supposed to open in time for the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, but that target date fell by the wayside due to technical and bureaucratic hurdles.

Controversial plans for a lavish opening ceremony and global promotional launch -- at an estimated to cost six million euros (7.9 million dollars) -- were scrapped earlier this year.

Barroso said after his visit: "I believe that Greeks should be proud of this excellent museum. It is one of the world's most important for our heritage, the heritage of Europeans but also of world culture."

Pirate attack on cruise ship 'like war'

The captain of an Italian cruise ship carrying more than 1500 people, including 74 Australians, whose Israeli security guards fought off marauding Somali pirates, said the attack had felt like "war".

The cruise liner Melody continued its trip on Sunday toward the Jordanian port of Aqaba while Somali pirates seized a Yemeni oil tanker after a clash in which two raiders were killed, according to Yemeni authorities.

Ciro Pinto, captain of the Melody, said one passenger and one crew member were injured by broken glass from windows shattered by gunfire as the pirates closed on the white-hulled vessel and opened fire late on Saturday.

"It was as if we were at war," Pinto told Italy's ANSA national news agency as he described the clash in which his ship - carrying 991 passengers and 536 crew - sustained smashed windows and bullet holes in the hull and a lifeboat.

Six men on a speedboat and armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles attacked the cruise ship, Pinto said.

"After four or five minutes, they tried to put a ladder on the bow," Pinto said. However, security guards on the ship "opened fire, and when they saw we were shooting, they abandoned their effort and went away".

"They still followed us for about 20 minutes and continued to fire at us," he added. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) says 69 passengers and five crew members are Australians who may be dual citizens and travelling on other passports. A DFAT spokesman said the owners of the vessel, MSC Cruises, had announced there were no injuries aboard the vessel.

But Australian embassy staff in Rome and Washington, and staff



from Australia's High Commission in Nairobi, Kenya, were working to confirm the welfare of any Australians on board.

MSC managing director Domenico Pellegrino said the Melody was protected by Israeli security guards.

"We use them because they are the best. And we have had a demonstration of that," said Pellegrino.

The ship was to rendezvous with international naval vessels in the Indian Ocean which would escort the vessel to Jordan. But Somali pirates hit back and seized an empty Yemeni oil tanker in a new raid off the Yemeni coast. A Yemeni official said the vessel belonged to Aden refineries. The Yemen defence ministry said on its website that two pirates were killed in the confrontation, and three other pirates and two coast guards were wounded. According to the official, the tanker was on its way back to the southern port city of Aden from Al-Mohra province, where it had unloaded its cargo.

Earlier yesterday, the Kenya-based environmental group Ecoterra International said Somali pirates had released a small Yemeni freighter MT Sea Princess II and its 15 crew, who had been held since January.

About 16 ships and more than 270 hostages are still being held by Somali pirates who seek huge ransoms for the release of ships.

At least 11 ships have been hijacked since the start of April, despite the presence of around 20

foreign naval vessels in the area.

According to the International Maritime Bureau, pirate attacks off Somalia have increased tenfold in the first three months of this year compared with the same period in 2008, jumping from six to 61.

Nine Somali pirates have been jailed for 15 to 20 years by a court in the breakaway northern state of Somaliland, an official said on Sunday.

"The nine pirates were found guilty of piracy and seven of them were given a jail term of 15 years, while two others were sentenced to 20 years," Mohamed Hashi, a Somaliland police officer, told AFP from Berbera, Somaliland's main port where the court hearing was held on Saturday.

The accused were arrested initially on April 18 by a Dutch navy warship patrolling the Gulf of Aden as part of NATO's anti-piracy mission.

Sixteen Yemeni fishermen they were holding were freed in the operation triggered by a distress call from a Greek merchant vessel.

The Dutch navy let the pirates go because they could not be prosecuted under Dutch law, the commander of the NATO fleet explained. But the pirates were apprehended by Somaliland authorities.

A Somaliland court jailed seven pirates for 20 years in February after they were picked up by local coast guards near Berbera.

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