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Senior Traveler *By John and Sally Macdonald*

The 'dreaded single supplement'

We seniors may soon rule the world, a frustrated reader recently wrote us, but when it comes to traveling solo and paying the bill, we aren't exactly treated like royalty.

When Leonard Kornit of Philadelphia went by himself on a land tour of Costa Rica not long ago, he was charged the advertised per-person rate.

But more recently, he wrote, when he looked into a cruise to Alaska he was told that although he was traveling solo, he'd have to pay twice what he would if he shared the cabin.

"It seems the only way I can vacation now," he grouched, "is to drive, bus, train, air, or walk.

"Do you have any suggestions? I'm sure there are lots of seniors out there eager to move around and enjoy what's left of life."

Indeed there are.

About 35 million adults are taking solo vacations these days, many of them, of course, seniors. And they're finding just what Kornit found: The price of a tour or cruise for a lone traveler without a roommate can range from the normal double-occupancy rate to paying for the entire cabin himself.

Seniors who may be single, divorced, or widowed often would rather travel alone. And many happily marrieds say they'd like to cross something off their bucket list that their partner isn't particularly interested in — for him, a golf trip with buddies, say; for her, a spa with girlfriends.

But take heart, solo seniors. The travel industry knows you are there and wants your business. Not only are tour companies and cruise lines offering more attractive deals to lure lone travelers, there are a number of websites aimed at helping solos find those deals.

Hotels charge by the room and not by the number of people sleeping there. But most pricing on land tours and cruises is based on double occupancy — two people traveling together. Cruise profits, especially, depend on both people in a cabin tipping or buying shore excursions, gifts, and beverages. And a solo traveler changes the mix.

So tour firms and cruise lines make up the difference with what some solo travelers call the "dreaded single supplement."

While each travel firm has its own solo pricing program, there are a few general

themes solos can watch for to find the right deal.

- An empty cabin is no good for profits. During peak travel times, a solo may be charged as much as twice the per-person rate. In slower times, those "supplemental" fees may be lowered or even dropped.

- Some firms will help find a roommate of the same sex. If none is found, the solo may be offered the cabin at half the full-cabin price and not have to pay the higher single rate.

- Some land-tour firms and cruise companies set aside a few rooms for solos. Some new cruise ships have even built in a few single-occupancy cabins and lounges.

Finding the right price in the maze of offerings isn't easy.

"There's a vast amount of information online," said Terry Dale, president of the United States Tour Operators Association. "But to save time and avoid lots of potential stress, solo travelers should ask a good travel agent who likely already knows what's available for your situation."

Sometimes letting the tour company assign you a roommate is the only frugal option. But being at the company's mercy can be a little weird.

What if my roomie snores? What if I snore? What if they want to stay up late while I'm the early-to-bed type? What if I just don't like the person the tour places me with? What if they just don't like me?

We can relate to that.

One of our friends, traveling solo, was paired with a stranger on a tour to Turkey a few years ago. They got along famously and became lifelong buddies. They've even traveled together since.

Another friend, traveling with us by train through western China a couple of years ago, had an assigned roommate who chose the lower bunk. That was OK until the next day, when, as we traveled across China's endless plains, our friend was told she couldn't sit on the lower bunk "because that's my bed." Since there was no chair to sit in, she spent the greater part of the trip crowding in with us or standing in the passageway.

And we are looking at an uncertain future ourselves. We're planning a trip with a teenage grandson this summer. Our tour company doesn't offer a room for three. John and

our grandson will share a room. The rate would be double for singletons on this particular trip unless Sally agreed to share quarters.

That price is pretty much equal to a king's ransom for a couple of seniors like us.

So Sally may have to share.

And she sometimes snores.

The company hasn't told us yet whether there's another woman looking to bunk with a stranger on our tour. And, truth be told, Sally's crossing her fingers that a roommate doesn't materialize between now and June. If there's no roommate, she'll have the cabin to herself at no extra charge.

We'll let you know how it turns out.

Travel publications and websites are paying more attention to solo travelers, includ-

ing how to scout out the best fees for singletons. But it can be complicated. As the publisher of one online newsletter for solo travelers put it: "The solo supplement is a big issue. I deal with it by avoiding it."

Here are some websites that don't avoid the issue.

General travel: www.cstn.org; www.travelchums.com; www.Backroads.com/singles, www.ricksteves.com/solo

Cruising: www.cruisecritic.com; www.solocruiseresource.com, www.cruisecompete.com

John and Sally Macdonald live on a houseboat in Seattle.



In peak season in the Greek isles, or anywhere, a solo cruise traveler might pay double the per-person rate for her cabin. Off-season, that tariff might be reduced, or dropped entirely.