

The State

After the flu, the bargains

IF YOU TOOK MEXICO off your “to go” list during the flu scare, it’s time to reconsider: All that bad press is translating to major bargains for summer travelers.

“It would not be unusual to see packages now on sale from 30 (percent) to 50 percent below what they were last year at this time,” Priceline spokesman Brian Ek said. “If you have the discretionary money to travel, it’s a great deal.”

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lifted travel restrictions to Mexico last month, the country’s tourism industry still is struggling to rebound from the loss of revenue caused by flu-related flight and hotel cancellations.

With hotels reporting occupancy down as much as 80 percent after the outbreak, tourism officials are ready to do just about anything to get Americans — 18 million of whom visited Mexico in 2008 — to return.

Bolstered by a \$1.3 billion economic stimulus package intended to help the country recover, hotels, airlines, cruise lines and vacation vendors are offering serious deals to attract visitors.

“It is a good time to book a vacation in Mexico because we want to attract tourism,” said Martin Gonzalez, the Mexico Tourism Board’s director for the southern United States. “You can get a very good bargain now. We want to welcome you back.”

Offers on popular discount travel Web sites include half-price flights (bookit.com), all-inclusive hotels for less than \$100 a night (cheapcaribbean.com) and vaca-

tion packages discounted by as much as 70 percent (applevacations.com).

Cruise lines were also affected by the flu. Carnival, which stopped service to Mexico for about six

weeks, will resume travel there by mid-June, spokeswoman Jennifer de la Cruz said.

“Now is definitely the right time to book,” de la Cruz said. “The impact of the economy on us is that we are still filling our ships but we’ve had to bring pricing down to do so. That’s a win for the consumer.”

Some resort-hotel chains, including Dreams, Real and Secrets, are even offering “flu-free guarantees” promising free vacation packages if visitors contract the flu during their stay.

“They’re trying to do anything to bring that travel back,” Ek said. “You’re likely to see really good Mexico travel deals right through the summer and probably well into the fall.”

But if you wait too long, Gonzalez warned, you might miss your chance. Some Cancun-area hotels already are back up to 50 percent

capacity, and some flights for later this summer are full.

“The demand is picking up,” Gonzalez said. “If you want to do it, do it now.”

Here’s a sample of Mexico-related deals found the week of June 1:

An airfare discount of \$100 to \$400 at Palace Resort hotels in Cancun, Riviera Maya, Cozumel