

Survey: Americans not using vacation time, airline food getting healthier

By Hugo Martín, Los Angeles Times

As an information technology supervisor at Pitzer College in Claremont, Dennis Crowley had so much work to do last year that he finished 2011 without using nearly five days of paid vacation.

"And to be frank, I was too busy to even realize I was losing time," he said.

Crowley's situation is not unusual. A survey by Harris Interactive Inc. found that by the end of 2012, Americans will leave an average of 9.2 days of vacation unused, up from the average of 6.2 days in 2011.

Nearly 90 percent of those questioned said they would take more leisure trips on their vacation if they had the time and money to do so, according to the survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults that was commissioned by travel website Hotwire.

Hotwire has a selfish reason for pointing out the survey results: The travel website says vacationers can save lots of money by traveling between Thanksgiving and Christmas. During the holiday gap, hotel rates drop 33 percent in Boston, 28 percent in San Francisco and 26 percent in Seattle, compared with the peak summer travel season, according to the website.

Crowley has learned his lesson. He said he is keeping closer tabs on his vacation time this year. But instead of using his accrued vacation time to travel, he said is spending more time with his children.

Airline food getting more healthful

On the nation's airlines, the days of free lunch are long over. That also goes for breakfast, dinner and snacks. Once complimentary, most airline food now comes with a price tag.

But there is some good news about what you get to eat on commercial airlines: It is getting more healthful.

That's the assessment of Charles Platkin, a professor of nutrition at the City University of New York's Hunter College who has tested and ranked airline foods off and on since 2000. With few exceptions, Platkin said most airlines now offer at least one healthful meal alternative on their menu.

"It's actually moving in a good direction," he said. "It's been an ebb and flow, but the overall trend is positive."

Platkin gave the top ranking this year to Virgin America, noting that the airline based in California offers low-calorie options such as roasted pear and arugula salad, a "protein plate" with hummus and whole wheat pita bread, plus oatmeal for breakfast. He gave the airline 4 1/4 stars out of a maximum of five stars.

At the bottom of the list was Allegiant Air, with a rating of only one and a half stars. Platkin said the Las Vegas airline "made it clear that their foods were not healthy. It shows."

The airline's snacks include M&Ms, Oreo Brownies and Pringles chips

Air Canada and Alaska Airlines came in second and third, respectively, in Platkin's ranking. The other big airlines – including United, American, Delta and US Airways – ranked in the middle of the list.

Platkin does not eat the food on every airline. "I don't have that kind of time," he said. "I have classes to teach."

Instead, he collects and reviews lists of food items, including the ingredients and calorie numbers, from the

airlines.

TSA defends stopping traveler over watch

A traveler was stopped by federal security officers at the Oakland International Airport this month because of an unusual wristwatch he was wearing.

When word got out about the incident, critics of the Transportation Security Administration blasted the agency, saying it was another example of the TSA overreacting.

In hopes of stifling the uproar, the TSA released a photo of the watch last week. This is no ordinary timepiece. It includes a toggle switch, wires and what look like tiny fuses attached to the wristband.

A TSA explosives detection team determined that the watch was not an explosive device. Still, the Alameda County sheriff's deputies, who were called by the TSA to investigate, arrested the watch owner, Geoffrey McGann, a teacher and artist from Rancho Palos Verdes. He was jailed on suspicion of possession of components to make a destructive device, according to news reports.

The Alameda County district attorney's office declined last week to file charges against McGann.

McGann's attorney accused the TSA of being "hyper-vigilant."

The TSA responded in its blog last week, saying, "Terrorists take everyday items and attempt to manipulate them to make improvised explosive devices. Our officers are trained to look for anomalies such as this one."