

# No one questioning Congress' travel expenses

By Jeremy Wallace, Sarasota (Fla.) Herald-Tribune

As the nation hurtled from one fiscal crisis to the next last year, Democrats and Republicans argued bitterly over the best solution – tax increases or spending cuts. But members of the U.S. House did agree on one thing: There was enough money for them to travel the globe at taxpayers' expense.

At least 172 House members spent more than \$1.5 million in 2012, visiting more than 90 countries and every continent but Antarctica, a *Herald-Tribune* investigation has found.

In all, House members spent more on 864 international stops last year than in either of the two previous years, congressional records show.

And the actual costs are much higher than Congress reported.

U.S. House members' trip reports do not include costs for flights by often-used military transports, which run more than \$10,000 per hour. Instead, only commercial flight expenses are documented.

The reports also do not detail expenses for spouses, who often accompany congressional members on trips at taxpayer expense.

Nearly 20 percent of the recorded travel costs last year – \$260,000 – were incurred by 20 House members no longer in Congress. Most of those members traveled after announcing they were retiring, lost re-election bids or declared they wouldn't seek office again.

House members typically defend travel as a necessary part of their jobs, especially on defense, foreign affairs, intelligence or emerging trade zones.

But the *Herald-Tribune* investigation found that in 2012, France, Ireland and Spain were among the five most frequently reported destinations for House members. Seventy-three members visited one of those countries, while just 35 made stops in Afghanistan.

And no House member reported visiting Iraq.

Other destinations included the Mediterranean island of Malta; Monaco, a city-state on the French Riviera; and the East African tourism hubs of Tanzania and Madagascar.

“If you think there are members abusing it – there are,” said Rep. Tom Rooney, a Florida Republican who says he only travels when it’s relevant to the committees on which he serves.

**The *Herald-Tribune*’s investigation showed that:**

- Former Rep. David Dreier, R-Calif., was the most traveled, spending 58 days overseas visiting at least 18 countries at a minimum cost of \$67,000 to taxpayers.
- A month after returning from Monaco, Democrat Dennis Cardoza, also of California – who announced in 2011 he was leaving Congress – spent seven days in Ireland, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, then abruptly quit the House three days after returning to the U.S.
- California Republican Dana Rohrabacher billed the government for the single most expensive trip, a seven-day excursion to Germany in January 2012 that cost taxpayers \$38,382.

The amount spent on Congress’ international travel is not a vast sum, given the \$3.8 trillion federal budget. But the spending appears to contradict pleas for fiscal restraint by congressmen, who have an approval rate of just 16 percent from voters, according to a May 9 Gallup poll.

**Bill would limit travel**

Even some House members say the travel has gotten out of hand in a time of deep cutbacks.

Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., reintroduced a bill early this year to limit foreign travel to only the most critical needs.

“I know too many times they are taking trips to European countries or Southeast Asia where we don’t even have troops,” said Jones, who made no international trips at taxpayer expense last year.

As with other bills aimed at restricting travel or increasing disclosure, Jones’ legislation has gone nowhere.

Tracking congressional travel remains notoriously difficult. House records often include general numbers and are typically filed months after the trips. They do not disclose when spouses go along, or what costs are incurred by the Defense Department for ferrying House members on more than 300 VIP planes.

And they don’t detail what, if anything, was gained during a given trip.

The *Herald-Tribune* investigation did not include travel by members of the U.S. Senate, which provides less detailed and accessible disclosure online than the House.

House leaders are showing more sensitivity to international travel. House Speaker John Boehner, following budget fights with President Obama, told members he would not approve international trips using military transports.

The result is more commercial airfare costs in 2013. When nine members of the House and seven staffers flew to Vatican City in March for the new pope’s Installation Mass, they reported spending \$32,768 in commercial airfare costs.

Since January of this year, dozens of members have traveled to locations including Switzerland, Belgium, the U.K., Germany,

Israel and Afghanistan.

There are two primary ways members of Congress and their staff are allowed to travel internationally, with the reporting requirements varying for each.

Members can accept international trips paid for by various special interest groups – examples include the American Israel Education Foundation and the Turkish Coalition of America – to promote better relations.

In 2012, 78 House members traveled to 30 nations on such trips, according to the regular disclosure reports Congress requires for such travel. The reports do not include trip costs.

Less transparent is international travel by Congress paid for by taxpayers. To travel, members need only secure approval from their committee chair or the House speaker. Those trips are reported by each committee in the Congressional Record, a near-daily publication by Congress.

Even congressional researchers are stymied in trying to assess the amount of overall travel.

“There is no single source that identifies all international travel undertaken by the House or Senate, and no means to identify the number of trips taken, destinations visited, travelers, total costs, or costs paid for by funds appropriated to government entities other than Congress,” says a report prepared by the Congressional Research Service and released in March 2012.

### **Departing members travel**

Few trips raise more questions of value to taxpayers than those made by departing members of Congress.

The *Herald-Tribune* found that the most prolific traveler last year was Dreier, the former California representative. He

announced in February 2012 that he would not seek re-election after California's redistricting process essentially eliminated his district.

Following the announcement, Dreier, who chaired the Rules Committee, took seven trips to at least 18 countries over 58 days.

As a committee chairman, Dreier could travel without seeking approval from anyone else in Congress.

He did not respond to repeated attempts to reach him for comment.

Dreier, who served in Congress for 32 years, made his final trip in October, a nine-day excursion to Africa, according to a report filed with Congress one month after he was officially retired.

The Congressional Record does not specify where he went in Africa, but he billed taxpayers for \$6,441 in transportation costs.

Rep. Dan Burton, R-Indiana, announced his retirement in January 2012 after 30 years in Congress. He then traveled to 14 countries during four trips taken from February to September. Burton, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, made his last trip in September to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. He reported spending \$10,033 on commercial flights for the five-day trip.

One month after he left Congress in January 2013, Burton was named chairman of the Azerbaijan American Alliance board. That group is a U.S.-based nonprofit that says in its mission statement it aims to promote understanding between the two nations.

In all, 14 members of Congress announced their retirement, resigned or ran for another office in 2012, yet traveled at a

cost of at least \$230,000 to taxpayers, according to the Congressional Record.

Five members lost their primary elections early in the year, then traveled internationally at taxpayer expense.

One was Pennsylvania Democrat Tim Holden, a member of the Agriculture Committee; he lost his primary election in April, and took four international trips between May and August, hitting 17 countries.

Government watchdog groups say that because of poor recordkeeping, it's hard to know if travel by "lame duck" members is legitimate.

"It's an area that is ripe for abuse," said Bill Allison of the Sunlight Foundation, which aims to bring transparency to Congress and has pushed for greater public disclosure concerning trips.

Some government watchdog groups say they expect members to build expertise by traveling.

Melanie Sloan, executive director of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, said she would be more concerned if members never left their districts or D.C., yet still tried to weigh in on complex global issues.

Still, Sloan acknowledged it raises eyebrows when France, Ireland and Spain are regular landing spots for many.

"When there are a lot of stops in Western Europe," Sloan said, "it looks a lot like a vacation."