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HURRICANE WATCH

U.S. airlines are responding to Hurricane Wilma's destruction with penalty-free change options to help those with scheduled trips to Cancun, Cozumel and the Riviera Maya.

Passengers slated to depart through Jan. 15 may choose a different destination or date without penalty, according to policies announced by US Airways, United, Continental, Delta and American. (Northwest will forgive penalties for changes only for flights before Dec. 16.) If the new ticket costs more than the original, passengers must pay the difference. Alternate **travel** plans must be chosen soon, usually by Nov. 11.

Tour operators are also cutting travelers some slack, to varying degrees. Vacation Express is allowing "all those with future **travel** plans who have been affected by this disaster to rebook any time in the upcoming year, without penalties or restrictions." Apple Vacations is offering breaks only to those slated to **travel** through Nov. 16.

Hotels have varying policies, reflecting wide differences in damages. Some hotels in the area have already reopened, others plan to at the end of January, and others still don't know.

Carefully consider plans to **travel** to the Yucatan, the U.S. State Department said last week in a public announcement set to expire Nov. 27. Those who decide to **travel** before then should understand that some services and facilities will be unavailable and "extensive reconstruction" will be underway.

SMART MOUTH

Love great food and don't mind paying for it? Head to San Francisco, which has the best restaurants in the country, but with prices second only to New York.

Those are among the findings of the 2006 Zagat Survey, the Bible of gourmands, who use it to decide where to eat in any of the 41 U.S. cities covered. Other findings, compiled from the experiences of 115,000 frequent diners:

* Meal prices have increased by 3 percent in the last year. An "average" dinner with one drink will set you back \$37.61 in New York and \$35.72 in San Francisco.

* Even those are bargains compared with restaurants in other world-class cities: An average dinner in a Tokyo restaurant is more than \$70, and you'll spend only a little less than that in London and Paris.

* The best food in Washington is found at the Japanese restaurant Makoto (4822 MacArthur Blvd. NW); dinner with one drink averages \$61. Following close behind for quality: the Inn at Little Washington (Washington, Va.), Maestro (McLean), Citronelle (Washington) and L'Auberge Chez Francois (Great Falls, Va.).

* Forty Washington-area restaurants made the guide. The cheapest: El Pollo Rico, where dinner at branches in Wheaton, Arlington and Silver Spring will set you back \$9.

Access to Zagat's Web site (www.zagat.com) is \$19.95 a year, but you can get free access, including reviews and reduced prices for guides, through tomorrow.

Michelin, the venerable publisher of guides to European restaurants and hotels, last week unveiled its first guide in North America: the Michelin Guide New York City 2006. In all, 468 New York City restaurants made the cut. And the top four: Per Se, Le Bernardin, **Alain Ducasse** and Jean-Georges.

TRAVEL TICKER

The fat lady will sing for Song on April 30. On that date, flights on the the low-fare Delta spin-off will be absorbed back into the parent company . . . Domestic airfares will rise 5 to 8 percent next year, and hotel rates in the United States will jump 3 to 5 percent at higher-end hotels, according to recent predictions by American Express Business **Travel**, the world's largest **travel** agency . . . AirTran Airways has stopped selling tickets through online agent Expedia.

BARGAIN OF THE WEEK

Fly to the Dominican Republic for \$313 round trip, including taxes. Details: *What's the Deal?*, Page P3.

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