

Financial Tips for Travelers Heading Abroad

By Lynn Ballou

Summer is here, it's time to travel and see the world. Many of you may be planning to take advantage of the great exchange rates and visit places you've only dreamed of before. There's a lot to think about before you take off, and many great websites and books chock full of terrific information about staying safe. This column will focus on a few practical tips from the financial perspective; a few you may already have in mind, and we can explore a couple of others you may not have considered.

1) Credit cards: Try to travel with two, and leave the rest at home in your safe along with any other unneeded items that might have your social security or other personal information on them. If you are traveling with a spouse or partner, maybe each of you can carry two different cards. If one is stolen or lost, or you reach your daily limit, it will be very helpful to have the other as backup. Call each card company before you go (for some you can now do this online) and provide them with your itinerary so that you will not find your charges denied. Be sure you have chip

enabled cards and a four digit numeric PIN set up on each. Test them before you leave, and check that they don't expire while you are gone. Make a copy (or a list) of the front and back of each card to leave at home and another to bring with you.

Another idea is to store copies of these cards in the cloud. There are a number of secure sites you can use to store documents these days. Be sure to choose a very secure password and only use this approach if you are traveling to places with cell and internet service and not remote areas where you are unable to retrieve the information.

2) ATM and Debit Cards: I'm not a big fan of traveling with debit cards because a thief can so quickly drain your bank account. I think it's very helpful to travel with an ATM card because sometimes local currency is all that's acceptable, there's a lower liability to you, and less can be stolen. Check your daily limit to be sure it's to your liking and maybe have some local currency on hand before you travel. When you do use ATM machines overseas, be sure they are legit. I prefer to only use

those at an actual bank branch.

3) Passport: Make sure it's current a few months before you go and won't expire until well after you return in case you are delayed. Make a copy to leave at home with a trusted friend, family member or house sitter and bring a copy with you as well (or as above, use a cloud storage solution). If you do bring a hard copy, place a copy of your passport and credit cards in your hotel safe. Again, I'm sorry, but I'm a paper fan. If my purse is stolen along with my phone, laptop or iPad, I can go to the hotel safe, use the hotel phone and visit the embassy with my paper copy. But the risk, of course, is that my paper copy can just as easily be stolen or compromised. I'm learning to embrace the cloud.

4) Medical Costs: So, true confessions — I actually never thought about this until my last overseas vacation when I became ill. Luckily, I only needed a few hundred dollars in care. Kelly Nicoll, account manager with Colleen Callahan Insurance Services in Pleasant Hill, told me that regarding foreign travel medical costs, "most employer-

based and individual plans cover life-or-death emergencies only; less severe ailments we might go to Urgent Care at home for, like getting sick or spraining an ankle, are usually not covered under foreign travel benefits." She further said that my husband and I could have purchased an excellent joint coverage plan for about \$200 with a very low deductible and reasonably high coverage. I feel VERY lucky that nothing worse happened, and trust me, next time we travel, setting this up will be one of my first priorities.

5) Cell phone plans: In my past experience, it's not been a barrel of fun to get on the phone with my provider and make changes in coverage. But I have to say that this last time, they made it pretty darn easy. I called to find out my choices for international calls, texting and content access and was able to set up a plan for my number and a different plan for my husband who uses his phone less. For a relatively low fee, I knew that I wouldn't come back to a wild, unpredictable bill, and if I did, I had it all documented, including a confirm number about what was set up, which they

also confirmed by email.

I hope this is helpful and adds to your financial peace of mind as you plan your next wanderings. I wish you safe and very enjoyable travels. Bon Voyage!



Lynn Ballou is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER (tm) professional and Regional Director with EP Wealth Advisors, a Registered Investment Advisory firm in Lafayette. Information used in the writing of this column is believed to be factual and up-to-date, but we do not guarantee its accuracy and it should not be regarded as a complete analysis of the subject discussed. All information is derived from sources deemed to be reliable. All expressions of opinion reflect the judgment of the author as of the date of publication and are subject to change. Please consult with qualified advisors when considering any action related to the topic discussed herein.

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

Business Bites

Compiled by Vic Ryerson

BevMo to Open Lafayette Store

BevMo, the Concord-based chain of beverage emporiums, will soon be adding a store in Lafayette, adding to the town's growing list of retail food and beverage outlets. The new store will be located at 3590 Mt. Diablo Boulevard. The grand opening is currently set for July 28. Check www.bevmo.com for further details.

Christmas in July???

We're done celebrating the Fourth of July, so it's time to do some Christmas shopping. The Assistance League Way Side Inn Thrift Shop in Lafayette is obligingly preparing for its annual "Christmas in July" event, which will be held from Tuesday, July 19, through Saturday, July 30 this year. The organization says its volunteer elves are uncrating all manner of Christmas inventory so you can be prepared when the season comes. The store is located at 3521 Golden Gate Way in the heart of downtown Lafayette. For information about the League, visit its website at www.diablovalley.assistanceleague.org.

Bluemercury Skincare coming to Lafayette

Bluemercury Skincare, the Washington, D.C.-based spa and purveyor of specialty skin care products, is coming to La Fiesta Square. The store will be located in the space formerly occupied by Pendleton. Information about the company's products and services is available at www.bluemercury.com.

More Fitness in Store for Lafayette

Wondering about that buildout going on at 3517 Mt. Diablo Boulevard, a few doors east of the plaza? **Orangetheory Fitness** will be opening a colorful new workout facility there in August or September, offering one-hour workouts in a group personal training setting. In the meantime, memberships are being offered at pre-opening rates. Contact Lisa Hanhan at (925) 299-9800 for details, or check out www.orangetheoryfitness.com for details about the company's program.

Be a Hero to Local Seniors

Mobility Matters is looking for volunteers to provide rides for otherwise homebound

Lamorinda seniors. Formerly known as **Senior Helpline Services (SHS)**, the organization assists area seniors with transportation needs through a network of volunteer drivers and a toll-free helpline for those seeking transportation. It is also the only volunteer driver program for members of Lamorinda Village. Contact Mobility Matters at (925) 284-4831 for more information.

Chamber Music

Lafayette Chamber of Commerce

www.lafayettechamber.org (925) 284-7404
Lamorinda Small Business Forum will present Protecting Your Business — Robbery/Recovery/Emergency, on Thursday, July 14, 5:30 to 7 p.m., at the Bank of the West Lafayette Branch, 3583 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette. The program is open to all businesses throughout Lamorinda.

Coffee with the Police Chief/Business Issues Forum will be held Friday, July 22, at 8 a.m. in the Chamber Conference Room. This event is open to everyone.

The Green Committee will hold an open meeting July 26 from noon to 1 p.m. in the Chamber Conference Room. Please park on the street.

The Ten Chamber Mega Mixer will be Thursday, July 28, from 5 to 7:00 p.m. at the Pleasant Hill Community Center, 320 Civic Drive, Pleasant Hill. Contact the Chamber for details.

Moraga Chamber of Commerce

www.moragachamber.org (925) 323-6524
The August mixer is 5 to 7 p.m. August 16: Beer at the Bruns/Cal Shakes. RSVP by August 10. (510) 548-3422 x118.

Chamber/Community Barbecue, 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, August 23. Sponsored by Safeway. RSVP kathe@moragachamber.org.

Orinda Chamber of Commerce

www.orindachamber.org (925) 254-3909

If you have a business brief to share, please contact storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com

Solar Installations Sprouting at Schools in Lamorinda

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Workers install solar panels at OIS.

Photo Victor Ryerson

There are differences of opinion about the best way to fund the solar plants, and in one instance the aesthetics of the structures is causing angst among some neighbors, but all indications are that the striking structures will be as universal as athletic fields at area schools.

Acalanes Union High School District will have the largest installations, with construction currently underway at all of its comprehensive high school campuses. The most powerful array, at Las Lomas in Walnut Creek, will provide a guaranteed reduction of 1,200 kilowatts used by the school, followed by Miramonte's, which will reduce use by 1,116. Kilowatt reductions at the other campuses are slightly less. The reduction of the district's carbon footprint will be the equivalent of taking 350 cars off the road, officials say.

AUHS's solar panel arrays will be

backed up by Tesla batteries, which will store unused power for peak period use. During the daytime hours, the solar panels will generate electricity for the school's needs. The systems are tied into the electric grid, and excess power generated during peak periods, such as afternoons and summers, will be sold to PG&E. Conversely, excess needs will be satisfied by PG&E when required. Such high-use facilities as stadium athletic lights, tennis court lights and swimming pools make high schools big power users, and facilities manager Dave Humphrey says the systems will never zero out or produce a positive income stream. California Public Utilities Commission regulations also limit the district's overall production to a maximum of 85 percent of its needs under the district's power purchase agreements, he says, so the systems are precluded from generating positive cash flow until a buyout

opportunity in 25 years makes it feasible. In the meantime, power supplier Solar City pays for the installations and maintains them under a service agreement, and sells power to the district at a specified rate per kilowatt hour.

Orinda Union School District has taken a different approach to ownership. It is installing solar systems this summer at Orinda Intermediate School, and at Wagner Ranch, Glorietta, Del Rey and Sleepy Hollow elementary schools, buying them outright and paying for them through the sale of power. Although smaller than the installations at the high schools, the five systems are expected to generate power in excess of the schools' needs and earn thousands of dollars in benefits for the district each year. The reason for the different financial outcome for the district is the funding method selected, and OUSD has been very fortunate. Specifically, with the help of low-cost bond financing, the district has purchased the systems instead of contracting with an owner solar company to buy the power under a power purchase agreement.

With the help of a consultant, the district looked closely at both options, and concluded that outright ownership was the way to go. Moreover, the consultant helped the district obtain Clean Renewable Energy Bond financing, which provides a low rate of interest. The process is competitive, and Stuart House, the district's facilities manager, is ecstatic about the result.

"We won't spend one penny of taxpayer money," he said, and the bond payoff will occur in 17 years. House anticipates that the district will receive \$50 thousand annually in benefits over and above the bond cost from sale of the excess power, and that these benefits might continue for 25 years — all without any taxpayer investment. The ben-

efits will save dollars that would otherwise have to be paid to PG&E from the district's general fund, and those funds will be available to the district for other uses.

There will be side benefits as well. More than just being a symbolic gesture to encourage environmental awareness, the systems will provide a hands-on tool for students to use to calculate actual impacts. For example, touch-screen kiosks at OIS will provide information about the amount of energy being used at the school, and furnish data necessary for science and math classes to calculate the tons of carbon dioxide production spared and the gallons of gasoline saved. On a more mundane level, the shady structures will afford covered parking for automobiles at all of the campuses, with very few parking spaces lost because of the construction. OUSD's consideration of solar power began when it sought to air-condition its schools, but was discouraged by the \$10 million cost. The new power source now brings that possibility within range.

Not all of the impacts of the program are so rosy, however. A group of residents on Martha Road across the street from Glorietta School, which is slated to have a separate solar array close to the street on each side, is seeking a stop work order and a better solution to the issue. They point out that the installations at all the other schools are smaller and are out of the sight of neighboring residences, and that the massive structures at Glorietta are inconsistent with the surrounding neighborhood's character and village feel. Discussions with the district are in progress.

In the meantime, expect to see construction of the big arrays underway at all of the area's schools. The power they produce should be flowing by the time the first bell rings in August.