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ONLINE TRAVEL

New, better sites to plan summer travel

Click, click, click for the perfect trip

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Special to the Tribune

Published May 28, 2006

With warmer weather fast approaching, it's time to begin anew that dreaded annual ritual of planning the summer getaway. It's a true modern-day irony that the most effective way to finally transport you and yours away from the family computer is to first spend some time smack dab in front of it. There's good news, however, as the online travel community continues to proffer up new and innovative tools to make the process more efficient and even somewhat tolerable.

www.equitrekking.com -- If seeing the world while perched on top of a horse has always been a dream, you no longer have to feel alone. For those who haven't yet seen Equitrekking, it's an international video series that allows the viewer to explore the world on horseback. As the show is not yet widely available to TV audiences, anyone with an Internet connection can now click on the large "Go" button near the top of the home page and choose from the assortment of video clips listed (currently covering Spain, New Mexico and Ireland, with more promised in the near future). Beyond the streaming video, the Web site also offers travel tips, a vacation guide, a monthly newsletter, expert advice and an online community for high-tech equestrians. Those looking for a true equine adventure should also check out Equitrekking's World Vacation Guide, which includes a clickable map highlighting horseback riding options worldwide.

www.sidestep.com -- The Web site many consider to be the inventor of the "meta-search" craze continues to push the edges of the envelope with its new "Activities" option. This feature, still in its "beta" phase (e.g. testing for bugs), now allows travel planners to instantly search dozens of relevant sites to find and plan things to do while on vacation. Simply click the Activities tab at the top of the home page, enter your destination and travel dates, and the SideStep engine automatically searches the databases of its partner sites to provide an impressive list of local attractions and activities. As is the case with hotels and flights selected at SideStep, tickets for each activity are purchased directly at the partner's Web site. By way of example, a search of Hawaii in mid-June of this year allows the site visitor to pre-book a volcano adventure and surfing lesson, a sunset sail and a luau to wind down the day.