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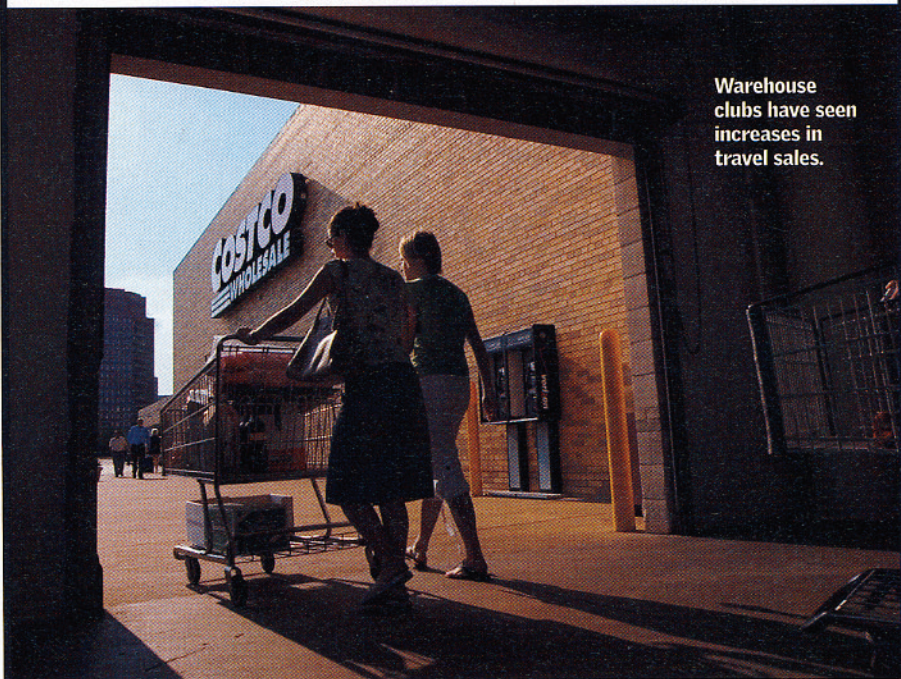
In the Heart of
the High Plains

Canyon, and Yosemite—are host to the country's most striking natural wonders. But these wildly popular parks draw tourists like magnets, to the tune of more than 10.5 million visits last year. So much so that the Park Service began a new initiative to encourage people to visit the less popular parks (see box, previous page). But there's another vastly underutilized resource: the 192 million acres of national forest, mostly in the West, where natural resources, such as wood and water, are protected and managed, and where recreation opportunities abound. Many national parks, in fact, are surrounded by national forests. Fred and Suzanne Dow, authors of the U.S. National Forest Campground Guide series (www.forestcamping.com), marvel at how crowded the campgrounds at national parks are. "We are always happy to return to our quiet,



New Mexico's Santa Fe National Forest.

uncrowded forest campsites," says Fred Dow. They recommend making day trips into the parks while camping at nearby national forests such as **Dixie National Forest** outside Utah's Bryce and Zion, **Kaibab National Forest** on the north rim of the Grand Canyon, and **Shoshone National Forest** at the east entrance of Yellowstone. Indeed, the rugged beauty of these forests and others like Montana's **Lewis and Clark National Forest**, **Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands**, and Washington's **Olympic National Forest**, make them destinations unto themselves. And while some forests are experimenting with entrance fees, most of them are free. ■



Warehouse clubs have seen increases in travel sales.

Cruises, Aisle Seven

Can you save as much money buying a trip at a warehouse store as you can buying paper towels in bulk? TRAVELER goes shopping. **By George Hobica**

When Melanie Miles bought cruise tickets for 35 friends last year, she went to the same place where she shops for everything else in bulk: Costco. The Leesburg, VA-based human resources consultant compared prices at other sources, such as online travel sites, but found that the warehouse store offered the best deal. "It couldn't have been easier," she recalls.

Bargain hunters know that the big warehouse stores—Sam's Club, Costco, and BJ's, to name three of the largest—are great places to find deals on everything from DVD players to pet food. But an increasing number of regular customers are also buying trips. "Our travel business is growing by leaps and bounds," says Shannon Parker, director of marketing for Costco Travel, who notes that people feel adequately protected by the company's satisfaction guarantee.

But do these warehouse clubs sell a cruise or hotel package at the same astounding wholesale prices that they

peddle a caseload of Charmin?

A sampling taken by TRAVELER says not quite. In May, Costco was selling an October one-week cruise round-trip from New York to Bermuda, in an ocean view cabin, on Celebrity's *Zenith* for \$799 per person. Travelocity was selling the same cruise, same week, for \$850 but with a \$100 rebate. For a one-week RCCL cruise on the Mediterranean, Costco had a limited offer of \$869 per person for an ocean-view stateroom. Travelocity's price? \$899. Orbitz was asking \$899, as was BJ's Vacations. (The same wholesaler that provides vacation packages to Orbitz also supplies BJ's.) The warehouse clubs fared much better with hotel package comparisons, in some cases offering prices that beat the online sites by as much as 50 percent. The selection, however, was more limited.

■ **Bottom line:** Don't pay the membership fee to join a warehouse club simply to book a trip, but if you are already a member, it may pay to do a price check before you book elsewhere. ■