Chilling on Caye Caulker—
You’d Better Belize It

by Nancy Bestor

When I was little, one of my favorite television programs was The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau. I fancied myself growing up to be an oceanographer, diving to the bottom of the deepest oceans to discover life never before seen. (Also thought I’d be a beautician, a teacher, and a mom, so at least I was right on one count.) I still love the water, and although I’ve never gotten my diving certification, snorkeling does make me feel like I’ve been transported to another world. The eerie quiet, the swaying sea leaves, and the exotic fish all add to that experience. Our recent spring break trip to Belize was a great opportunity for me to continue to explore the underwater world, as Belize boasts 186 miles of barrier reef, just one mile off the shore of Caye Caulker, where our family spent five sunny days.

Belize’s Barrier Reef is part of the 560-miles-long Mesoamerica Barrier Reef that stretches from Mexico to Honduras and is the second largest coral reef system in the world, after Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. My husband, two teenage daughters and I took a snorkel boat tour from Caye Caulker (pronounced Key Caulker), visiting three different spots on the reef, and it was without a doubt the most exciting snorkeling I have ever done.

We saw all kinds of beautiful fish and coral, all pointed out by our tour guide, who snorkeled with a spear/pointer that he continued on page 2

The Best Travel Products for
Your Carry-on Luggage

Travel rules and regulations have changed a lot over the past 10 years. It used to be much easier to hop on an airplane and get across the country with whatever you wanted to carry in your bag. But I’m sure we can all agree that we’d rather travel by airplane, with all its rules and regulations, than by covered wagon (although I’ve often wondered how I’d look in a Little House on the Prairie bonnet).

While it’s a bit more difficult to carry items on airplanes today, travel experts continue to invent new products to make the carry-on, quick trip as easy as possible. Here are some of the latest items selling like hot cakes at Travel Essentials.

Collapsible Water Bottle
Lightweight and easy to carry, the space-saving Vapur Collapsible Water Bottle ($9.99) is the perfect alternative to bulky traditional bottles. Instead of being rigid and heavy, the Vapur Bottle is lightweight continued on page 4

Driving in Europe: How
to Avoid Traffic Tickets

by Robert H. Bestor, Jr.

The business of traffic tickets when driving in Europe can be difficult to navigate. We use the word ‘business’ advisedly because, in some cases, that’s what it seems to be. The great city of Florence, Italy, for example, rakes in more than 50 million euros each year from traffic tickets, a good percentage of them issued to visitors in European rental cars. But it’s not just Florence and Italy. All over Europe authorities are using high tech equipment to catch more violators than ever before. No longer must you be observed breaking the law by a live person, pulled to the side of the road and ticketed. Most tickets are now issued elec continued on page 3
Chilling on Caye Caulker...

would use to clue us in to octopi, moray eels and other fish hiding amongst the coral. He carried chum in his swim trunk pockets and fish trailed along after him, waiting for treats. It was the first stop on our tour, however, that far surpassed any of my previous snorkeling experiences. The name of the stop was Shark Ray Alley, and it was exactly as advertised—a chance to swim with nurse sharks and southern stingrays. Now I thought we’d see a nurse shark or two, and perhaps a few stingray, and they’d be a ways off in the distance, afraid to get too close to humans. I thought wrong.

At any given time, there were 5-8 nurse sharks, and 15-20 stingrays, swimming all around us, eating the chum our guide tossed to them. The depth of the water was such that an adult could easily stand, but when standing, the stingrays swarmed around your legs, grazing you as they passed by. Although I knew I’d be letting down Jacques and the Undersea World staff, I chose to swim. The stingrays generally ranged in size from one to four feet in diameter, and one was huge, at nearly six feet across. The nurse sharks were not small either; six to eight feet long would be my estimate. Ash, our guide, kept telling us how friendly the stingrays and nurse sharks were, as he invited us to pet them and even hold a stingray. I knew Monsieur Cousteau would have been disappointed in me once again, I declined.

When not snorkeling or jumping off docks into the warm and very inviting Caribbean Sea, we spent our time on Caye Caulker idling in hammocks and lazily strolling around the island. Caye Caulker’s motto is “go slow,” and that is exactly what we did. There are no cars, only electric powered golf carts, and no paved roads, just dirt and sand. About 1000 people live on the island, which is about three miles long and less than a mile wide. We ate fantastic local food—our two favorite spots were a tiny hole in the wall restaurant called El Paso, and Fran’s Fast Food, an outdoor barbecue shack that serves dinner only. El Paso offered up a great stewed chicken dish that included two pieces of chicken, rice and beans and coleslaw for a whopping $3.50. Fran herself tends the grill at Fran’s Fast Food every night, and hawks her wares as people walk by: “Hi guys, are you looking for some good food tonight? I’m cooking up some great food here. It’s Frantastic.” Some nights she had barracuda, red snapper and shrimp, each cooked in a delicious butter and garlic sauce. Fran’s menu also included chicken and pork ribs in a mouth-watering barbecue sauce. All her meals are served with a vegetable curry and rice side, a garlic baked potato, coke or rum punch and a slice of cheesecake for dessert. For $10 a person (non-fish) or $12.50 (fish), it truly was Frantastic.

Our favorite breakfast spot was Amor Y Cafe (Lonely Planet’s top pick as well). The homemade yogurt, granola and bread were served in lots of mouth-watering combinations. A few of our top meals included fruit smoothies, toast with peanut butter and bananas, and grilled cheese with ham and pineapple. This was rounded out by fresh orange juice and good coffee. What more does a good breakfast require?

The “go slow” motto of Caye Caulker doesn’t apply just to vacationers however. Food was excellent and service friendly everywhere, but everyone went slow, so we learned to relax and enjoy our surroundings while waiting for our food.

We stayed, in our opinion, at the best spot on the island: Seaside Cabanas (www.seasidecabanas.com). This hotel is located right on the beach, just steps from the water taxi dock, and has one of the few pools on the island. The 17 rooms are situated around the pool, a few hammocks, and an appealing deck, and range in price from $85-170 depending on the room and the season. Our room was $105 a night, with two double beds, and we could not have been happier. The view, the service, and the location were all outstanding. The hotel manager Israel, his wife and staff of 10 were extremely helpful, informative and kind.

Many people use Caye Caulker as a base for diving and snorkeling, and it’s easy to see why. The island is a great place to relax, but it’s also very close to outstanding underwater life. A trip here for either or both these activities would not be a mistake.

Notes:
- We took the water taxi to and from...
Driving in Europe...

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tronically and sent by mail. Sophisticated cameras can now catch drivers speeding, talking on a cell phone, not wearing a seat belt, driving in restricted zones, or even following too closely. And the cameras never get tired or have to stop for coffee. Thus a lot more tickets are being issued.

Here’s the way it usually goes down: You return from Europe, organize your photos, and get on with daily life. Then one to 12 months after your return (or in some cases even later) you find a charge on your credit card from the rental car company. In most cases the charge is around $50. What is it? Well, you’ve probably been photographed breaking the law; speeding, running a red light, driving in a restricted zone, etc., and the $50 is not a fine, it’s an administrative charge the rental company imposes for providing your name and address to the ticket-issuing agency. Later, you may or may not receive a payment demand for one or more traffic violations from the police. (In most European countries, speeds—both locals and visitors—are not stopped and ticketed, they are caught by automatic cameras and notified by mail.)

Four years ago, while driving near Lindau, Germany in an industrial area, I noticed a bright flash on a power pole about 100 yards ahead of my car. I quickly realized I had probably been photographed traveling 65 kph in a 50 kph zone. A few weeks later I was notified that my card would be charged $30. I had probably been photographed traveling 65 kph in a 50 kph zone. A few weeks later Avis charged my card about $30, not for the ticket-issuing agency or a private company it may have hired to collect fines.

The question then becomes, how to pay the ticket. Sometimes that’s not easy, principally because the ticket and accompanying correspondence are usually in a foreign language. Frequently the documents have a return address, phone number, and bank account numbers for an electronic funds transfer. To pay by bank transfer, however, you’ll probably have to go in person to your bank, pay a transfer fee of about $35, and perhaps other charges, that could exceed the cost of the ticket itself. Some call the phone number provided on the notification and give their credit card number. Others mail a personal check in a U.S. dollar amount that equals the euro amount of the fine.

Cameras in restricted driving zones (Zona a Traffico Limitato or ZTL) catch literally thousands of visitors each year in Italian cities, especially Florence. Many of them are not even aware they are in an area that requires a special permit and they wind up getting multiple tickets, each at around 100 euros. They are so unaware that they don’t even realize they have been ticketed until months later when they get a collection notice in the mail. They may also find out about a ticket when the rental company’s administrative charge appears on their credit card. Italian law requires only that the ticketed driver be notified of the violation within one year.

Entrances to ZTLs are marked by signage in Italian. Some drivers report seeing the signs just as they turn into a restricted street, but by that time there is usually no turning back. Permits to park in ZTLs are not available from rental car companies. We’ve also heard of visitors whose hotel was denied entry into the country next time they try to visit! This, too, is very unlikely, though some time ago a customer told me he wasn’t allowed through customs at the Zürich Airport because of an unpaid traffic ticket. I know of many drivers who have been ticketed over the years and, other than the foregoing Switzerland incident, none has ever reported any repercussions. In most countries, non-payment of a ticket is a civil misdemeanor. One also assumes that customs officers have bigger fish to fry than ticketing traffic scofflaws.

• If I don’t pay the ticket will I be denied entry into the country next time I try to visit? This, too, is very unlikely, though some time ago a customer told me he wasn’t allowed through customs at the Zürich Airport because of an unpaid traffic ticket. I know of many drivers who have been ticketed over the years and, other than the foregoing Switzerland incident, none has ever reported any repercussions. In most countries, non-payment of a ticket is a civil misdemeanor. One also assumes that customs officers have bigger fish to fry than ticketing traffic scofflaws.

• A good source of info on this topic is the Bella Toscana website, and there are many sad stories of multiple tickets posted on the travel forums of Frommer’s, Rick Steves, Fodor’s, and TripAdvisor.

For the discussion of whether to pay the fine at all, we’ll set aside the moral issue and focus on the practicality of such a course of action. The ‘ignore’ decision raises a number of questions:

• Will the rental company pay the ticket and charge my credit card? The short answer is very unlikely—providing it’s a moving violation and not a parking ticket. The driver is the responsible party and for guilt to be established it must be determined who was driving the car (some European drivers use a variety of reflectors and other devices to hide their image from the camera). For a rental company to pay a customer’s fine and hence his credit card would deny due process. Since it’s not responsible, the rental company doesn’t care whether the fine is paid or not. (We have heard that Italy is trying to pass a law forcing rental companies to pay the ticket and then charge the renter’s credit card.)

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• If I don’t pay will it be turned over to collection and affect my credit? If ticketed in Italy you will be contacted by the “European Municipal Outsourcing,” a private company that collects traffic fines on behalf of numerous Italian cities. It appears, however, that they are not a debt collections company and will not affect your credit if you do not pay. As to other countries, I have heard—but cannot confirm—that once authorities realize the ticketed driver lives outside the EU attempts to collect the fine are dropped.

—Robert H. Bestor, Jr., owns Gemütlichkeit Car Rentals (www.gemut.com), renting cars to European travelers for the last 20 years.

"It is no coincidence that in no known language does the phrase ‘As pretty as an Airport’ appear."—DOUGLAS ADAMS
The Best Travel Products...

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and flexible. It stands up when full but is so pliable and foldable that you can easily roll it up and tuck it into a small pocket when it’s empty. Vapur Bottles are also BPA free, dishwasher safe and freezable. Each bottle comes with a handy carabiner for easy attachment to any backpack or belt loop. It’s also great for taking on a flight—just toss an empty Vapur into your carry-on and fill it up on the other side of security.

Venture Safe Camera Case

The brand new VentureSafe 50 Camera Case & DigiPouch ($29.99) from PacSafe is a security-minded shoulder bag designed with electronic devices in mind. Perfect for cameras, phones and mp3 players, the VentureSafe 50 features a slash-proof adjustable shoulder strap, a velcro and buckle closure for the front flap, a rubber securing loop to keep the zippers tucked away beneath the flap, and internal slip pockets for extra memory cards or credit cards and cash. There’s a headphone jack on the back of the bag if you’re using it with your mp3 player, and a special loop in case you’d rather slip it onto your belt. The DigiPouch is the perfect way to secure your camera or other electronics, both safe and handy, while you see the sights.

Toothpaste Tablets

New Toothpaste Tablets ($5.95) from Archtek offer a simple, effective, easy and travel-friendly alternative to toothpaste. Simply chew a Toothpaste Tablet and then brush and rinse as normal. Your teeth will be sparkling clean. Each bottle contains 60 tablets—enough to keep your mouth minty fresh through any trip. Maybe best of all, because they’re not liquid, you can take them in your carry-on without worry.

Zip n’ Go Travel Pant

One of our favorite travel clothing items is the zip-off travel pant. They may sound dorky, but the truth is, they are quite practical. Heading from cold Ashland, Oregon to the tropical climate of Belize, Nancy and Bob both started out in their Royal Robbins Zip ‘N Go Pants ($69.95), and once they landed in Belize, they zipped off the lower portion of their cool and comfortable pants and presto, they were wearing shorts, perfect for the tropical climate! The pants also work great on cool mornings that warm up in the afternoon. Royal’s Zip n’ Go pants are 100% nylon, so they wash easily, dry quickly, and include a zip security pocket to store money, passports, or more. Available in men’s and women’s sizes, the Royal Robbins Zip ‘N Go Pant is the perfect travel pant.

Go-Tubb Containers

Water-resistant and food-safe, GoTubbs are clever little containers that are perfect for pills, jewelry, spices, change, vitamins, snacks or any little things you’d like to pack, store and organize. Available in two sizes, the small size measures 1.4 inches in diameter and is one inch deep (14 cubic...
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centimeters of volume), while the large GoTubbs are 3 inches in diameter and are also 1 inch deep (36 cubic centimeters of volume). To top it off GoTubbs’ ingenious pop-top design allows them to open easily with a simple squeeze. GoTubbs come in sets of three small Tubbs ($6.95) or three large Tubbs ($8.95).

Eagle Creek Traverse Pro 22”

The new Traverse Pro 22” Rolling Carry-On ($300) is yet another excellent rolling bag from Eagle Creek. It is sleek, stylish and features a checkpoint-friendly zip-off daypack that will fit most 17” laptops. The daypack opens clamshell-style and lays flat, allowing you to pass through security without having to take out your laptop. It also offers a “speed-thru” security pocket with plenty of room for tickets, passports, boarding passes and ID. And, its larger front pocket houses an organizer with fleece-lined electronics slots for cell phones, iPods and PDAs. The maximum-carry-on-sized main bag has several zippered storage pockets, a smooth and sturdy telescoping handle and tough, off-road-capable wheels built to easily handle rough terrain. And last but not least, the Traverse Pro is covered by Eagle Creek’s very generous “No Matter What” warranty.

TSA-Approved Triple Security Lock

The Lockdown Triple Security Lock ($13.95) is a handy, TSA-approved and TSA “proof” lock with a few twists. Two braided steel cables and a three-dial re-settable combination lock allow you to lock several zippers at once, lock two bags together or lock your bag to a stationary object. But how is it TSA “proof”? Well, the Lockdown Triple Security Lock’s double-cable system helps to avoid lost locks due to TSA’s inattention. Simply use the small cable to lock your zipper shut while at the same time locking the longer cable to the bag’s handle. So if TSA does open the lock on your zipper, the longer cable ensures that the lock stays with the bag!

Compact Security Belt

The exciting new SPIbelt Compact Security Belt ($21.95) is designed to keep your “small personal items” comfortably close. This fully adjustable belt offers a handy nylon stretch storage compartment that starts out small and expands to meet your needs. The pouch portion is seven inches long and can carry as many as four iPhones! More practically, the SPIbelt will easily hold all your small items including cell phone, iPod, keys, cash, credit cards and ID cards. Put your ID and boarding pass in for easy access at the airport, or put your room key, ID and some cash in so you can take a hands-free walk in a foreign land. If your travels become more adventurous and you find yourself hiking, climbing or running, the SPIbelt does not bounce or shift, making it extremely comfortable. This product is made in the USA.

Eagle Creek No Matter What Duffel

Eagle Creek’s No Matter What Duffels ($65 - $95) might be the best bang for your luggage buck. Available in four sizes, each offers lots of packing space in a super-rugged package. Each No Matter What Duffel comes packed away in a handy and sturdy storage pouch that keeps them out of the way until needed. There are two ways to carry the No Matter What duffel—with the comfortable webbing handles, or with the included shoulder strap. Planning on picking up a lot of souvenirs on your next vacation? Toss a No Matter What Duffel into your suitcase and fill it with mementos for the return trip. Each bag is constructed of sturdy, 100% recycled nylon and polyester fabrics, so they’ll last through all your adventures. And of course, they are all backed by Eagle Creek’s amazing “No Matter What” warranty.

Woolite Travel Laundry Soap

Sometimes packing light for your trip means packing clothes that you can wash and wear again while you’re on the road.
Yodeling Through the Swiss Alps

by Nancy Bestor

The town of Mürren, Switzerland, a mountaintop village located 5,400 feet above sea level, could have been taken right out of a fairy tale. While strolling among its traditional homes and gazing out at its truly breathtaking mountain panoramas for three nights last July, I wouldn’t have been at all surprised to see Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs on the trail, or to hear Heidi yodel from any of the dozens of mountain huts and homes.

Mürren, which can only be reached by cable car or on foot, has a year-round population of 500 people, but hotel beds for 2,000. It is busiest in the winter months, when alpine skiers arrive to glide down the slopes, but summer is a beautiful time to visit, as wild flowers abound, trees bloom and the hiking and exploring via the amazing network of trams, gondolas and railways is outstanding.

We chose Mürren as a base for our Swiss Alps experience based on a recommendation from Rick Steves' Switzerland Guidebook. “Mürren is as pleasant as an alpine resort can be. Traffic free, the town sits on a ledge 2,000 feet above the Lauterbrunnen Valley, surrounded by a fortissimo chorus of mountains,” says Steves.

Our train and cable car journey from Geneva included three seamless transfers at Bern, Interlaken Ost and Lauderbrunnen, and could not have been easier, more relaxing or more picturesque. We arrived in the quaint and sleepy town of Mürren at 6pm, after most tourists who visit for the day had already departed. With quite a few hotel options, we chose Rick Steves’ budget recommendation, the Chalet Fontana (http://www.ferntree.ch/chalet/ fontana_summer.htm.) Owned and operated by Denise Fussell, a delightful Englishwoman, we required two rooms for our family of four, which cost $90 each. Breakfast was included, as was admission to Murren’s Alpine Sport Center, and Denise was a wealth of information about the area and its restaurants and activities.

While it doesn’t take much more than 10 minutes to walk the town from end to end, Mürren still offers all the necessary businesses and services, from a small but well equipped grocery store to a couple of souvenir/clothing stores, a bank and several restaurants. The town’s social hub seems to be the aforementioned Alpine Sports Center. This state-of-the-art facility boasts an indoor pool, indoor gymnasium, outdoor mini-golf, a soccer field, two ice rinks in winter, a fitness room, saunas, whirlpools, athletic trainers and doctors. It regularly attracts athletic teams from Switzerland, Germany and Austria for specialized training.

After our first night in Mürren, we planned a hiking excursion that began with a cable car ride to the summit of the Schilthorn, a 9,700-foot mountain above Mürren, where portions of the 1969 James Bond movie On Her Majesty’s Secret Service were filmed. From the summit we cabled down a short ways to Birg (about a thousand feet lower), and set off on our four-hour-long (and entirely downhill!) trek. The hike was outstanding, very steep at times, through beautiful meadows, over creeks, and right next to (and I do mean RIGHT NEXT TO) cows with large jangling cowbells grazing in the grass. Cows are everywhere in this region and their cowbell sounds provide a lovely background music (the hills really were alive....). We stopped about halfway down from Birg in the one-building village of Schiltalp at a working farm for delicious milkshakes, goulash soup, tomato salad and sausage (about $50). I’m continued on page 7
Yodeling Through the Swiss Alps...

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certain the milk came from the cows and the sausage from the pigs raised right there on the mountainside.

From Schiltalp we hooked up with the Children’s Adventure Trail, which offers a playground along the way designed for younger children than ours, but also features a foot massage station that we all benefited from. The station is designed for weary hikers to walk barefoot first over big rocks, then medium rocks, pebbles, wood chips, trunks of logs, and finally through a knee deep cold water trough. It was very refreshing on our tired feet. We also enjoyed the “arm refresher”, another trough in which you dunk your arms above the elbows in the cold water for 30-60 seconds.

We ended our hike back in Mürren, where we ate at our favorite alpine restaurant, Stager Stubli. The authentic Swiss food was the best we had anywhere in the country. Our meal included lamb and fries, hash browns with a fried egg, pork sausage in onion sauce with hash browns, and a tomato/mozzarella salad. Outstanding food, which did not come cheap (about $100), but was extremely satisfying and worth it.

Mürren is home to several internationally known races, including the Inferno Mürren, which is the largest amateur skiing race in the world, and first run way back in 1928. The Lauterbrunnen Valley and surrounding mountains offer the Switzerland of storybooks. And while I can’t see myself racing its trails in the winter, I can easily see myself returning in summer to hike the mountains and ride the trains. Maybe I’ll even do a little yodeling of my own.

Chilling on Caye Caulker...

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Caye Caulker, which is about 20 miles from Belize City. The boat cost $10 (US) each, and took approximately 45 minutes from Belize City.

- We used French Angel Tours for our snorkel trip. Ash was a great guide and the tour well worth the inexpensive price of $25 each. The tour was about three hours, and included a fruit snack. All snorkel/diving tours on Caye Caulker offer similar tours, and the price tends to be about the same everywhere.
- We took a 30 minute boat ride to

San Pedro, on Ambergris Caye. In our opinion, it was not worth the trip. San Pedro is much, much busier than Caye Caulker, cars and noisy gas powered golf carts whiz all over the crowded roads (which are paved, I might add), and it does not have the laid back, casual feel of Caye Caulker. If you’re thinking about staying on a Caye in Belize, my advice is to skip Ambergris and head right over to Caye Caulker.

“Nothing we’ve found makes this dirty travel job easier than Woolite laundry soap. Available in packs of ten leak-proof and travel-friendly packets ($5.95), Woolite makes washing your clothes in a hotel room sink a snap. Each packet contains a quarter ounce of liquid soap, which is plenty for a sink-load of laundry, but well under the limits for carry-on luggage.

“Fishing is boring, unless you catch an actual fish. Then it is disgusting.” — Dave Barry
Air travel in the past few years has become fraught with hidden fees and strict luggage requirements. The fees can really add up, and checking your bag can be tedious and frustrating. One of the easiest ways to save a little time and a lot of cash is to pack everything you need in your carry-on and avoid a checked baggage fee.

Packing appropriately can be time consuming and stressful, and we’d like to help. On April 26th, we’ve invited Anne McAlpin, world-renowned packing expert, to visit Travel Essentials and share her tricks, tips and advice with travelers. The workshops are at 2pm and 6pm and will last about an hour, with plenty of time afterward for questions. Both workshops take place in our store, at 252 East Main St. in Ashland.

Anne McAlpin has been traveling the world for years and has been a featured guest on Oprah, The View, CNN and The Today Show. She is the author of the book and DVD, Pack it Up. Her workshop is fun and informative, with advice on packing the perfect travel wardrobe, packing the perfect carry-on bag, tips on getting through security quickly and saving money at the airport.

Here are some of our favorite tips from Anne’s book:
• Make a packing list and check items off as you pack.
• Women’s shoes pack neatly inside of men’s shoes, protecting the women’s shoes.
• If you’re pressed for space, wear your bulkiest items of clothing while you travel.
• Packing folders and cubes are a great way to organize outfits and save space.
• Sweaters are easy to roll up, don’t wrinkle, and fit in the corners of your bag.
• Thread necklaces through a plastic straw and they’ll stay kink-free.
• Reversible jackets and convertible pants offer more outfit options.
• Use brightly colored electrical tape on your bags to help you identify them.
• When in doubt, leave it out!

Participants in our workshop will get more than Anne’s travel wisdom—we are also offering 10% off all regularly priced merchandise and other special offers on the 26th.

Travel Essentials’ Anne McAlpin workshops are always packed and seats fill up fast, so please call us at (541) 482-7383 to reserve your spot today!