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Aspin's Venice stay becomes cost issue

ROME (AP) — In Europe on official business, Defense Secretary Les Aspin spent several days vacationing at an expensive Venice hotel. He paid his own way, but taxpayers picked up the tab for several aides and a doctor who accompanied him, officials confirmed Monday.

A longtime female friend who vacationed with Aspin at the Danieli hotel, a converted royal palace where room rates run upward of \$400 a night, returned with him Monday aboard a government jet.

Officials said she would reimburse the government.

Aspin, appearing tan and rested, defended the five-night stay at the hotel. "I paid for the vacation myself," he said.

As for the decision to keep his entourage at the hotel, one of Europe's most expensive, he said: "That's not my idea. ... Where they stay is their business. They can stay wherever they want. ... I'd be just as happy to be by myself."

Pentagon spokesman Vernon Guidry said Aspin was accompanied on the vacation by a top military aide, a military physician, his communications team and a security detail. He said final costs figures were not immediately available.

Guidry declined to give the exact number of the entourage, but a Pentagon source, speaking only on condition he not be named, said nine aides accompanied the secretary.

Guidry said Aspin hasn't taken much personal time since moving into the Pentagon's top job, even though he has been ordered by his physicians to get rest after recent heart troubles that led to his getting a pacemaker.

He said Aspin spent about two hours a day talking on the phone with officials in Washington.

As for the staff that accompanied Aspin, Guidry said it was unavoidable because defense secretaries require a special communications link to the president and a security detail at all times.

Aspin's Republican predecessor, Dick Cheney, spent some two-day weekend vacations in Rome during his tenure and also took a similar number of communications personnel with him whenever he flew to Wyoming once or twice a year for fishing trips.

Aspin left on an eight-day trip to Europe last weekend, stopping in Brussels for a two-day conference of NATO ministers before making a quick visit at Aviano air base in northern Italy, where U.S. pilots are participating in NATO operations enforcing the "no-fly" zone over Bosnia.

But from Wednesday night through Monday morning he vacationed at a Venice hotel.

A clerk at the Danieli, a converted royal palace, said double rooms run for \$417 to \$459 a night and suites run upwards of \$700.

Aspin was accompanied by his longtime friend, Sharon Sarton, a steel executive from Lake Geneva, Wis.

Sarton flew commercially to meet Aspin in Venice but was accompanying the defense secretary back home on the military jet. Guidry said Sarton would reimburse taxpayers \$1,100 for the flight home.

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