



Wish you were here!

And you totally could be, for much less money than you might imagine. Use these **33 surprising, easy insider strategies** to save on flights, hotels, road trips, cruises, meals and tours—then take off for your own personal version of paradise.

BY RACHEL FRIEDMAN



1 Time your searches right “Domestic fares are updated at 10 A.M., 1 P.M., 4 P.M. and 8 P.M.,” says Matthew Ma, co-founder of theflightdeal.com. So if you’ve been searching for a flight and the prices have been steeper than you’d like, check back a few minutes after the update hours and you may find a rate drop.

2 Book by place Conventional wisdom holds that the earlier you book, the better. But, in fact, the ideal time varies by destination. “For the best domestic fares, book four to six weeks out,” says Kayak spokesman David Solomito. But if you’re off to the Caribbean? Just two to four weeks. As for other hot spots around the globe: Book Europe six months out; Asia, five weeks; South America, three to six weeks; Central America, four to five; and Africa, two months. If you buy your tickets when the time is right, savings can range from \$100 to \$1,000.

3 Exploit a loophole Tickets sold in the U.S. must have a 24-hour cancellation window (if the reservation is made more than seven days out), and this magical sliver of time is when you can alter your ticket sans ugly fees. So if your flight suddenly becomes available for less, contact the airline to be credited for the difference in price. Or use the “airline refunds” function on the flight-tracking site yapta.com.

4 Fly on weekdays If you’re traveling domestically, says Solomito, leave on a Friday, when prices are lowest—15 percent lower on average than the most expensive travel day, Sunday. Going abroad? Aim for a Tuesday or Wednesday departure. And Monday is your best bet for domestic and international returns (except from Europe, where Tuesday wins).

5 Lock in your price Commitment-phobe? Use optionsaway.com to hold a great fare for up to three weeks. Holding fees vary by flight and the number of holds on it, but most are between \$6 and \$24.

6 Search outside the box Go to google.com/flights, add dates and a destination that’s as open-ended as you want (“the Caribbean,” for example) and you’ll see tons of flights across a regional map. So if you simply want an island getaway, you can go with the cheapest option: There may be a several-hundred-dollar gap between lowest and highest.

7 Get paid for delays Go to bhttp.com and click on AirCare, where a \$25 insurance plan gets you \$50 for delays of two or more hours, \$250 for missed connections and \$1,000 for more than two hours on the tarmac. To go after funds (up to \$800) you may be owed from past delays, use getairhelp.com. The fee is 25 percent of any money the site scores for you.



SAVE ON LODGING

8 Phone it in Use mobile booking apps, says hotels.com travel expert Taylor L. Cole: “More than 20,000 mobile-only hotel deals appear daily.”

9 Do an executive search During holidays, Google “business hotels” wherever you’re headed. According to newyork.com’s site director Laura Michonski, “rates will be up to 30 percent off to make up for scant execs.”

10 Get a refund Book on tingo.com and it will stalk your reservation for you in case rates drop before you check in. The site’s average refund? \$54.

11 Be social Follow hotels on social media to get fan-exclusive deals and more. Kimpton, for instance, posts secret social passwords. If you spot one and use it at check-in, prizes will range from free valet parking to a room upgrade.

12 Be a houseguest Airbnb, the site that lets you stay in local homes (often on the cheap) could set you back even less than you think: If you have Amex points, you can now put them toward your stay.

13 BID LIKE A SHARK Priceline.com offers preset, deeply discounted rates under its Express Deals banner for hotels that range from basic to posh (one to five stars). Want to pay even less and practically guarantee your bid gets accepted? The secret, says the site’s travel editor Brian Ek, is to find the cheapest Express Deal within your preferred star rating, subtract 10 percent—and make that your bid.

14 Plan early “Book nine to 12 months out, when rates are lowest—or between January and March, during ‘Wave Season,’” says Carolyn Spencer Brown, editor-in-chief of cruise critic.com. This annual promotion involves not just sales (don’t be surprised to find \$500 discounts) but also possible upgrades, free airfare and great drink packages.

15 Take off on a dime If you don’t book early or during Wave Season, do the opposite, suggests Brown: “The next cheapest time is within three months of a departure, when rooms are usually released after cancellations.” To fill those cabins, or rooms that were never booked, companies will discount up to 40 percent.

16 Think seasonally Take Alaska, where the high season is summer. If you book for mid-May instead, the cost could plummet (maybe \$640 versus \$1,420 for a week). Meanwhile, the Caribbean is cheapest from June to November when, despite possible rerouting around a hurricane, you should still find plenty of sun.

SAVE ON CRUISES



★
SAVE ON
MEALS

17 Use the rule of two If you're in a town with big tourist attractions, walk two blocks away from them and watch food prices drop, says travel blogger Josie Schneider.

18 Get schooled See if there's a cooking school where you're visiting, says Freda Gore, the chef-owner of Caribbean Culinary Tours. "Many have restaurants where future stars are cooking great food at great prices." Two faves: L'École at the International Culinary Center in New York (lecolenyc.com) and the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in St. Helena, CA (ciachef.edu/california).

19 STAY IN Sites that let you eat in local homes now include hosts who cook professionally. Among the listings on eatwith.com, for example, are meals with chefs who've worked in Michelin-starred restaurants (for about a third of what you'd pay at a joint with any stars). But even if the host isn't a pro chef, this is a fun, affordable way to get to know the local food—and the locals!

20 Ferret out freebies Free wine, cheese and nibbles are frequently on offer at hotels without guests even knowing, says David Viviano, chef and food and beverage director at the St. Regis Aspen Resort. "Cocktail hours, welcome receptions and other extras aren't always well advertised, so ask hotel employees for the scoop."

21 Be the early bird Wherever you are in the world, find out when the local happy hour is. Then ask your hotel for a few bar recs and feast on discounted food and drink, suggests Christin Fernandez of the National Restaurant Association.

22

Eat on the cheap like a celeb chef
Five faves across the U.S.

Emeril Lagasse swears by the legendary po'boys at Parkway Bakery & Tavern in New Orleans. "They start at \$7, and they're big enough to share!" (parkwaypoorboys.com)

Bobby Flay considers L.A.'s Cha Cha Chicken a must for coconut fried chicken, a mulato Cubano sandwich or dirty rice and beans—all bargains. (chachachicken.com)

Buddy Valastro loves Pittsburgh's Pamela's Diner for hotcakes filled with strawberries, sour cream and brown sugar. "Simply amazing and a steal at under eight bucks!" (pamelasdiner.com)

Anita Lo is hooked on the namesake fish dish at My Ceviche in Miami. "It's perfect after a day at the beach—refreshing and cheap!" (myceviche.com)

Kevin Sbraga satisfies his cravings for a roast pork sandwich—a Philly staple—at John's Roast Pork. A large sandwich is just \$8.75. (johnsroastpork.com)

Anita Lo and Emeril Lagasse





23 Just deal To pay less for everything from food walks to heli-rides, go to yipit.com, enter your destination and click “tours.” Or scan the same deal sites you’d use at home (Groupon, etc.) for discounts on the road. Tour companies sell extra inventory there, says Avi Millman, co-founder of Stray Boots Tours.

24 See a specialist Pay up to 50 percent less than you would for a conventional tour and get a unique take on a city, too: Vayable.com connects you with in-the-know guides—local artists, foodies, filmmakers and more—who may even have VIP access that lets you skip lines, says founder-CEO Jamie Wong.

25 Go gratis Many cities have volunteer (that is, free) guides. A good place to search: the Global Greeter Network, with guides in 25 countries—and a few U.S. cities (globalgreeternetwork.com). In Europe? Try one of the great walking tours on offer from United Europe Free Tours (unitedeuropefreetours.com).

26 Ditch the gas card Oddly, to save money on gas, you’re better off avoiding gas station–branded plastic, says credit card expert and author Beverly Harzog. “The interest rates can be sky-high and the rewards aren’t as good as you’ll get with some cash-back credit cards.” The PenFed Platinum Rewards Visa Signature Card, for example, gives three to five percent back on gas purchases. Harzog also notes that being beholden to one gas brand can mean missing out on deals. When you’re comparison-shopping for gas (see the next tip), “you’ll find that the best prices nearby may well be at a station that’s not the one on your card.”



27 Pump apps for intel The GasBuddy app uses your location to show you the most recently reported prices at nearby gas stations so you can fill up wherever’s cheapest, no matter what your fuel of choice (you can search by regular, midgrade, premium and diesel).

28 Rent-a-deal Even with a reservation, ask if there are any cheaper specials when you’re picking up a rental car, says Greg Phillips, a spokesman for Enterprise. “There may be extra cars on the lot that let the branch offer you a last-minute bargain.”

29 COOL IT Invest in a good cooler or portable fridge (prices start at \$50 for either), says roadtripamerica.com co-founder Megan Edwards. “BYO food can easily shave hundreds off a road trip.” If you still want meals out, go for breakfast, often the cheapest showcase for local deliciousness.

30 Share toys Pay less than you would at a gear shop by renting someone else’s kayak, tent, paddleboard—whatever plaything you can think of—through gearcommons.com. Skis, for example, go for an average of \$25 a day, half what you’d likely pay at a shop. Just search your destination to see who’s got what.

31 Borrow an RV (OK, for a fee.) The average family’s RV sits unused most of the year. No surprise, then, that through rvshare.com and other sites, you can now

take someone else’s rig out for a spin—yes, even across the country—often for less than you’d pay at conventional agencies and with more negotiable terms.

32 Stop and smell the savings If you’ve rented an RV from a conventional agency, take your time to enjoy your route. Most RV rentals come with a daily allotment of “free miles,” after which, you’ll likely pay an overage fee (25 to 35 cents per mile, usually). Those numbers may seem tiny, but they can add up fast—so slow down!

SAVE ON
**GLOBE
TROTTING**



What's wrong with this picture? You're not in it! Go join the café crowd on Budapest's Zrínyi Utca.

33 HIT THE CHEAPEST HOT SPOTS

The planet is full of places where your dollar goes even further than the plane did to get you there. Check out five faves with bonus intel on average rates thanks to TripAdvisor's booking data.

Caribbean **PUERTO RICO**

While room rates are a bit higher here than on other islands, plentiful cheap flights from the U.S. mainland make Puerto Rico an overall bargain. Throw in San Juan's gorgeous colonial center, the island's white sands and turquoise waters—plus plantain-based mofongo—and you may want to extend your stay.

NICE HOTEL	MEAL FOR 2
\$150	\$50
PER NIGHT	3 COURSES

Asia **VIETNAM**

Limestone islands in mystical bays, buzzing cities, remote beaches and some of the cheapest and best eats on earth—\$1 pho, for starters—are just a few of the draws here. Although Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi rightly tempt tourists, try lesser-known Da Nang, where delish beachside cafés and street-food stalls compete for your dollar or maybe your fiver.

NICE HOTEL	MEAL FOR 2
\$43	\$14
PER NIGHT	3 COURSES

Africa **SOUTH AFRICA**

With its embarrassment of riches (vibrant cities, beautiful beaches, a delicious wine route, and, oh yeah, lions and elephants and great white sharks) South Africa is many getaways in one. And operators are luring Americans not only with direct flights from a few U.S. cities, but also with great deals on the ground.

NICE HOTEL	MEAL FOR 2
\$100	\$30
PER NIGHT	3 COURSES

Latin America **NICARAGUA**

With several active volcanoes to hike up (and one you can sandboard down), monkey-filled jungles, beautiful beaches and some of the prettiest colonial architecture in the Americas, Nicaragua is out Costa Rica-ing Costa Rica—and for less dinero. Stay in León for volcano-hopping, San Juan del Sur for surfing, and Granada for sheer gorgeousness-gawking.

NICE HOTEL	MEAL FOR 2
\$118	\$16
PER NIGHT	3 COURSES

Europe **HUNGARY**

Though a lot of Hungary is wander-worthy, Budapest alone warrants the trip. This Danube-straddling, dome-filled city—with, according to one recent survey, Europe's cheapest per-glass wine cost (\$2.59), among other bargains—is a few years into a hot streak. In fact, "Budapest" has become one of the top travel searches in the U.S. thanks, pros theorize, to *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

NICE HOTEL	MEAL FOR 2
\$79	\$26
PER NIGHT	3 COURSES