

# Travel Hacks That Actually Save Money

*Seasoned travelers and personal finance experts share their top vacation budgeting tips.*

By **Caroline Bologna**

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The benefits of travel are manifold. Whether you're going on a multi-country adventure or getting some R&R at the beach, there's real value to unplugging from everyday life, connecting with new people and enjoying a change of scenery.

But what people aren't always sure about is the monetary value of the experience.

"I think there's an assumption that travel has to be expensive because until fairly recently it has been more of a luxury and certainly more expensive," said Katie McIntosh, a travel blogger and creator of [The Katie Show](#). "While it's a privilege and still requires some money-saving dedication, the cost has been significantly reduced now that we have access to many different price-checking websites, apps, and platforms."

Indeed, there are lots of ways to cut down on costs as you plan a trip — some more effective than others. Below, McIntosh and other experts share their favorite hacks for saving money when they travel.

## Rethink your default airport

"It makes perfect sense that when booking a vacation, you'll select to depart from your nearest airport, but it's worth comparing prices first," said Blake Walsh, a travel expert at [Travel Lens](#). "Vacation costs can differ when traveling from different airports, so carry out some research to see if you can save money by flying from an airport which isn't as close to where you live." If you live in Miami, for example, you might find cheaper options if you expand your search beyond Miami International Airport and look at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport as well. Similarly, if you're a New Jersey resident, you might have better luck flying out of Philadelphia than Newark.

"While you may have to drive a little extra, flight prices could be hundreds of dollars cheaper at the next-closest airport," said Phil Dengler, co-founder of [The Vacationer](#).

## Find a local car service

"Pre-planning things as much as possible is a great way to save costs," said Laura Ratliff, senior editorial director at [TripSavvy](#). "For instance, while I used to rely mainly on big global rideshare services in most cities, now I take a few extra minutes to find a local car service wherever I go."

Think about how many [Ubers](#) or [Lyfts](#) you take during a typical vacation and how those costs add up. Compare their prices with other ride options, and you might be able to save a significant amount of money on a trip. Ratliff noted that local car services have other benefits.

“Many of them are cheaper, have nicer vehicles, and offer services like pre-scheduled, in-person airport pickups, which can be handy when you’re struggling with lots of luggage or arriving late and want the reassurance that you can safely get to your hotel,” Ratliff said.

### **Prioritize free parking**

Whether you’re driving your own car or renting one, don’t overlook the related costs that can add up – like parking.

“If I have a rental car, I look for a hotel that offers free parking for guests,” said [travel blogger](#) and TV host [La Carmina](#). “Otherwise, the hotel parking rate can cost you \$40-50 a day.”

She also tries to choose a hotel that’s within walking distance of great food and amenities to cut down on transit time and gas costs.

“When I was in Miami with a rental car, I stayed at [AC Dadeland Hotel](#) because it is connected to an upscale mall and has plenty of free parking, which checked off all these boxes,” she noted.

### **Or better yet, stick to public transportation**

“Taking public transportation is often much cheaper than getting a taxi or renting a car,” said travel blogger [Sean Lau](#). “It is also a great way to get to know the area and get a better sense of the local culture.”

Although not every destination has quality public transit, plenty do. So, before your trip, conduct some research to see if you have safe and convenient options.

“Many popular cities offer easy-to-navigate metro systems, as well as widespread bus lines or trams,” said travel blogger [Rocky Trifari](#). “If your route is accessible via public transportation, you can probably get there for a fraction of what it would cost to go directly via taxi.”

### **Break up your trip with multiple lodgings**

“Consider breaking up your trip by staying in different hotels rather than the same one,” said Sosie Matos, a wealth coach at [OneEleven Financial Wellness](#). “You can sometimes get a better deal and also get to explore more of the area.”

Staying in different accommodations allows for greater flexibility, which leads to more savings. As you look into hotel options, see how the rates change for various durations.

“Search different lengths and dates to make sure you’re taking advantage of promotions like third, fourth or fifth night free,” advised Chris Hutchins, a “financial optimizer” and host of the podcast [“All the Hacks.”](#)

### **Choose accommodations with a kitchen**

“One of the biggest expenses when traveling is food,” Lau said. “Eating out can get expensive, especially if you’re dining in a touristy neighborhood.”

Consider cooking some of your own meals. In addition to saving money, you’ll get a nicely immersive tourist experience by shopping for local ingredients at markets or grocery stores. Try your hand at a local recipe if you’re feeling inspired.

“I always look for hotels with at least a kitchenette,” Dengler said. “Staying at a hotel with a kitchenette or full kitchen allows you to prepare your meals and avoid high restaurant prices. I save hundreds of dollars on trips by cooking breakfast and lunch in my hotel room or Airbnb and only eating out for dinner.”

### **Look for restaurant specials**

“I always save my fine dining experiences for lunch,” said Jessica van Dop DeJesus, founder and editor at [The Dining Traveler](#). “Most restaurants offer a prix-fixe lunch menu that is much more affordable than the evening menus. I splurge for lunch and then eat at fast-casual places or street food at night.”

Even if you want to try lots of restaurants during your trip, you can still spend less by putting in a little time to plan in advance. Cast a wide net and look for deals.

“A usually pricey restaurant may have a delicious special menu one night of the week or a discounted happy hour menu at a particular time of day that you can uncover with some research and planning,” Ratliff said.

### **Take advantage of ‘shoulder season’**

“I recommend traveling during the destination’s shoulder season,” Dengler said. “That is the time between the peak and the offseason.”

He noted that the shoulder seasons for a summer beach trip are typically late May to early June and late August to mid-September, when it’s “still warm enough to enjoy the beach and ocean but without the usual crowds.” Different types of destinations have different seasonal demand, so, as always, do your research to identify this ideal travel time.

“Not only will it be cheaper for you to fly to the destination, but once you arrive, prices might be cheaper overall,” said travel blogger [Esther Susag](#). “A lot of popular destinations will hike up the prices of their excursions, hotels, and even restaurants during popular months to travel.”

### **Keep a currency conversation cheat sheet**

When traveling abroad, try to familiarize yourself with the local currency.

“One common behavior people fall into while traveling is overspending simply because they don’t understand the conversion,” McIntosh said. “When there is a large difference in the conversion rate it can be overwhelming to keep track of and constantly be doing the mental

math of calculations, so many times people just purchase things without thinking of what they are actually spending.”

### **Avoid costly exchange rates**

On the subject of foreign money, you’ll want to get the best exchange rates possible, so that your money goes further.

“If you are traveling to a destination where you have to use a foreign currency, you might be tempted to use a currency exchange,” Lau said. “However, this can often be a costly mistake. Instead, consider using a bank card that offers no ATM withdrawal fees and no international transaction fees while you are abroad.”

### **Be strategic about when you book flights**

“If possible, pick your trip dates based on the cheapest days to fly to your destination,” Dengler said. “Doing so can save you hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars.”

Google Flight’s calendar view can help you identify the cheapest travel dates from a variety of airlines. The day you search and purchase your flights can also make a difference. Weekends are popular times for booking, so costs might be higher.

“Buy air tickets on Monday or Tuesday between 11 p.m.-12 a.m.,” recommended finance coach [Tatiana Tsoir](#). “Prices are highest at weekday lunchtime, and sometimes even if you keep checking the same site several times, the prices will go up because your IP address is being recognized. Clear the cookies.”

### **Set flight alerts**

“Flight alerts can be a useful way to help monitor airfare if you have some parameters in mind for your trip,” Trifari said. “For example, if you know you aim to go to a specific destination during certain dates, I would recommend enabling alerts to monitor for price increases and decreases. Not unlike stocks, timing the market can be difficult.”

If you wait to book your flight, you risk the possibility of the price increasing, which is more likely to occur for popular itineraries. When you aren’t taking an in-demand trip, however, you stand to save money by waiting and then pouncing as soon as there’s a price decrease. The other side of flight alerts is opting in for notifications of trending deals, which can be helpful, even when you don’t have a specific trip in mind.

“I love using flight services like [Scott’s Cheap Flights](#) or [Travel Pirates](#) to get notifications for cheap flights, and that can also take out a lot of the work to research and find the best deals,” Susag said.

### **Find free tours**

“A little time spent researching can save you a lot,” Hutchins emphasized. “The trick is that the travel industry is great at monetizing our desire for convenience and simplicity, so you might need to put in a little extra effort, but the returns can be huge.”

This not only applies to flights and accommodations, but also activities like guided tours.

“I just searched ‘London guided tour’ and the top few results were all in the \$30-\$200 range,” Hutchins explained. “But if you had found your way to [Free Tours by Foot](#), [Strawberry Tours](#) or [GuruWalk](#), you’d realize there are a ton of amazing free tours you can take – though I do encourage you to tip the tour guide for their services.”

## Explore outside main tourist areas

“It doesn’t matter where you travel to, if you are in the main tourist area then you will be paying more than you need to,” McIntosh said. “Often times you can easily save money by simply walking a couple of streets outside the center of town – provided the area is safe to do so, of course.”

McIntosh suggested taking this approach for meals to get better value for your money, as well as a more authentic experience.

“Check out forums and groups for the local community where you’re going,” Tsoir advised. “Ask for their advice on local gems, places to eat and visit beyond the touristy areas. Sometimes those are nice to explore and are cheaper too, while also being spots that reflect the true culture.”

## Use comparison sites for research

As you plan your next trip, consider exploring sites like [Kayak](#), [Expedia](#) and [Orbitz](#) to get a sense of which dates and travel providers are offering the rates you seek. Play around with the destination options as well.

“One of my suggestions is to look at smaller neighboring towns, cities, or even countries to fly into instead of some of the major hubs,” said Ben Julius, founder of [Tourist Journey](#).

“Sometimes, you’ll find that this saves quite a bit of money, and often provides less of a tourist view of the destination. For example, instead of flying into Milan or Venice, try Verona or Bergamo instead.”

Erika de Santi, a solo travel expert and co-founder of [WeRoad](#), advised using these booking sites as an initial guide.

“Comparison sites can be useful in the research stage of planning your trip,” she explained. “But while they claim to scan every site to bring you the best deals, they often don’t flag those that are specific to an airline or hotel.”

De Santi recommended booking your flight or hotel of choice directly with the travel provider unless it’s more expensive. Consider calling to see if they’re offering additional deals you aren’t seeing online as well.

“When I’m ready to book I always prefer to book direct with the airline, so I’ll check on their website, and then I’ll download their app and check the price there too,” said Claire Summers, the travel blogger behind [Claire’s Itchy Feet](#). “This doesn’t work for all airlines but some often do special app-only prices, so it’s worth a try.”

## **Join travel rewards programs**

“I highly recommend booking your next vacation with a travel rewards credit card,” Dengler said. “Popular cards like the Chase Sapphire Preferred and American Express Platinum Card have high earning rates for common travel purchases, including airfare, hotels and rental cars.”

If you’re not looking to add another credit card, you can also earn travel rewards points by joining the loyalty programs for the chains you use.

“Always be sure to apply the number to whatever you travel by on that trip,” Tsoir said, pointing to Marriott Bonvoy and World of Hyatt. “There is one there too. And those bigger chains often have locations that are prime. Points on airline travel and hotels make it significantly cheaper than traveling using dollars.”

Tsoir also suggested signing up for email lists that share promotional rates and taking advantage of discount programs you qualify for — whether it’s through work, school, military service or something else.

“There are plenty of apps that will help you find live discounts on food and drinks, cheap fuel, and occasional freebies,” said David Woody, a country development and travel expert at [Sixt](#).

Don’t be discouraged if you can’t take advantage of all the discounts out there, though.

“While you can seek out all the travel hacks to save money, at the end of the day, hotels, flights, dining, activities all come with a cost and to really enjoy a trip, you likely need to be prepared to spend some money,” Hutchins said. “But I think the experience you get from traveling, meeting people from other cultures, and eating food from around the world, is a fantastic use of my savings.”

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