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INTRODUCTION

Traveling is seen as a luxury that can be afforded only by some and necessitates saving over several months in order to get the holiday that you want. This does not have to be the case. With a bit of careful thought and a lot of planning, it really is possible to travel on a budget.

Of course, traveling on a budget means different things to different people. Some would consider a budget holiday to involve backpacking and camping. This type of holiday can be done on a budget relatively easily; the real skill arises when you are trying to get a 'luxury' holiday for a budget price.

The Travel Industry Association of America estimated that the average family spends over \$2,200 a year on an extended vacation. This is an enormous amount. If you save just 10% of that amount, think how it will add up over the years.

Interestingly, paying more does not necessarily guarantee you a better holiday. Whenever you are on vacation, you will probably be surrounded by other families, some of which have paid more than you for the vacation and others which have paid significantly less.

This book is all about learning to be one of those who sits smugly by the others declaring the 'cheap' vacation that they have managed to secure. It's easier than you think!

1. PLANNING YOUR VACATION

Planning is the key to success when it comes to getting a budget holiday. There are many things that you can influence such as when you book, how you travel, whether you go package or build your own agenda. All of these things can have a significant impact on the price you pay. Above all, each of these things are within your control!

1.1. When to Book

Most people know exactly when they are intending to take a vacation. This can be used to your advantage when it comes to planning.

Deciding on when to book is a bit of a gamble. Whilst many tour operators will offer cheaper prices and early booking discounts, you may find that last minute deals are also available which will prove better financially.

There are many factors that you should take into account when deciding on when to book for maximum financial gain:

- Are you flexible in terms of dates that you are prepared to travel?
- Are you flexible in terms of destinations that you are prepared to travel to?
- Will you be buying a package deal or will you be building your own package?
- Are you considering a popular destination where many tour operators or flight companies travel?

Firstly, if you are flexible in terms of location and dates then you will almost certainly benefit from waiting until the last minute to book your holiday. Last minute deals are, of course,

something that you cannot rely upon and if you are set on going to a certain destination at a certain date then last minute is far too risky.

If you are planning on creating your own package then you need to be aware that you are taking multiple gambles. For example, you need to consider your airfare, hotels and transport. Whilst you may get an excellent last minute flight, you may not be so lucky when it comes to the hotel or car hire. In fact, you may find that paying a premium for other parts of your holiday will end up out-weighing any last minute savings you have made.

As a general rule, if you are looking to go on a specific holiday, a cruise, for example, with a specific company or a destination that is only offered by a few operators, you may find that last minute bargains are simply not available. Cruising is a classic example of this. A cruise line will offer holidays for a certain price, whilst they may offer their holidays through different agents who may individually offer discounts, the actual price of the cruise is likely to remain very similar no matter who you go to for your price.

2. CHOOSING YOUR SEASON AND DESTINATION

The two key things that can have a huge impact on the cost of your vacation are the destination and the time of year. In fact, the single biggest saver is likely to be when you travel, not how successfully you manage to haggle for that last minute hotel bargain!

Don't overlook the importance of considering these two factors together. Some destinations will be extremely cheap at one time of year yet finding a bargain four months later may be impossible. Traveling to a popular destination at a peak time will never be cheap. For example staying at a luxury hotel in a party city on New Year's Eve is not likely to be a budget holiday; however, traveling to a traditional summer resort over New Year's may be a very different story.

One thing that is very important to realize is that low seasons are low for a reason. A classic example of this is hurricane season in the Caribbean and Florida. Other low seasons to be wary of are the extremely hot areas such as Egypt during the summer months, when the heat can be so oppressive that it makes the holiday less enjoyable. Summer resorts are often so quiet during low season that there is quite literally nowhere open. This can be great for a retreat, but when it comes to a raging nightlife you may be sadly disappointed!

2.1. Shoulder Season

Shoulder season is the perfect time to be trying to travel for those who want to find a happy medium between low and peak seasons. Identifying where is in shoulder season when you want to travel or when your favorite destination is in shoulder season can save you literally hundreds of dollars.

Take a look at the guide books. Whilst they will not tell you when the shoulder season is, they will tell you when peak and low seasons are. The time in between, is, by definition, the shoulder season.

With almost every resort there is a period where the prices become low, not because the location is now poor but because all of the hotels and flights are still servicing the area but the demand is simply not there. Examples of shoulder seasons are Europe in the fall and the Caribbean during late spring.

2.2. Winter

Winter is an interesting time of year to travel. Before Christmas, most individuals are trying to make last minute shopping trips. After Christmas, people are dealing with their credit card bills. As such, holidays on far off beaches are often incredibly cheap during the winter period.

A wonderful destination for the winter months is Asia. Flights are losing popularity, however, availability is still good, meaning that there are plenty of discounts on offer. Weather is variable in Asia during the winter which could mean that you are surrounded by snow one minute and then basking in glorious sunshine. This lack of dependability is something that puts a lot of visitors off and can mean that there are some excellent bargains for those prepared to take the risk!

2.3. Spring

If you are looking to travel to Europe, this is the time to do it! Flights are a lot cheaper during the spring months when temperatures are still relatively low.

Mexican beaches and the Caribbean islands start to see their prices drop from mid April as the weather becomes hotter. However, during the spring months, the water and air temperatures are still pleasant and the resorts less crowded.

During later spring, for example May, the traditionally hot and dry countries are not in their peak seasons but have not yet become intolerably hot. So if you want to visit Morocco, Jordan or Egypt, plan a spring vacation.

2.4. Summer

Finding a bargain in summer is tricky. Americans, Japanese and Europeans are all on the move and this is also the time of year that most weddings take place, so honeymoon destinations are in a great deal of demand.

During the early part of summer, through June and July, Caribbean destinations are still good to get a deal, provided you try to book before the Europeans start to flood in during their school holidays at the end of July.

Safari holidays are a good option between June and September. High season ends in May, but the weather is still relatively dry.

Flights and hotels are still quite reasonable in Southeast Asia during the summer months, but temperatures can be quite hot, so if you can't stand the heat, avoid this destination during the summer months.

2.5. Fall

This is the time to head to Europe. Flights to most major European destinations will be cheaper from October onwards, mainly because the schools are no longer on holiday and families are not traveling as much. Temperatures are normally perfectly pleasant until mid November, so grab yourself a fall bargain in Europe.

3. HOTELS AT LAST MINUTE

For the brave, it is always worth calling the hotel that you want to stay at on the day that you intend to arrive, or possibly the day before. Hotels will often be prepared to offer substantial discounts on the day, as from their point of view an empty room is a complete waste of money. If you are feeling particularly bold it is even worth telling the hotel what you are prepared to pay and asking them if they have any rooms available.

This is a particularly effective way of going about getting a really good deal if you are traveling to a city that has several hotels, it is out of peak season and you are flexible in terms of facilities.

If you are not feeling quite so bold in terms of leaving it until the last minute, you can phone the hotel a few days in advance. Whilst you may not get the total bargains, you are still in a good position to negotiate, particularly if you are traveling out of season. If you are targeting a specific hotel, check out their cancellation policy. For example, if a specific hotel requires at least 3 days notice to not charge for a cancellation, then this is the point where they are most likely to receive the most cancellations. Hotels will then be eager to fill these spaces.

Another good way to utilize the cancellation policies of hotels is to book a relatively cheap chain hotel that allows you to cancel free up until the day of travel. Then, on the day you can phone around other hotels to see if you can get a better deal. If you do then you can cancel your previous booking without penalty; if you do not then you will still have a roof over your head!

Negotiations over extra free nights or discounts will generally only work with smaller regional hotels, as the larger chains have a central system and they will not normally negotiate directly with a guest. Bear this in mind when you are selecting your targets!

Facilities such as swimming pools, fitness centers, satellite televisions all add to the costs of a hotel. Consider this carefully. Are you paying extra for facilities that you don't want, won't need and don't even notice? If you are after a cheap base, then avoid hotels with extra facilities as this will almost invariably add to your costs.

4. BAGGING A CHEAP FLIGHT

Buying a last minute flight is actually quite tricky. Many charter airlines will deal primarily with packages and as such the flight-only option can actually end up costing more than a simple package.

All is not lost though! There are still plenty of ways to pick up a flight bargain. Bear in mind that if you are going for a do it yourself option on your holiday, it is wise to book the flight first, as this is likely to be the largest expenditure and there is generally less of a variety of carriers meaning less room for negotiation. Almost without exception finding a cheap hotel will be easier than finding a cheap flight.

Trawl the websites of those flight operators that cover the location which you wish to travel to. Join their mailing list. OK, so you may end up with endless junk mail, but you will also get to hear about all of the deals that they are currently offering.

As a general rule, the best deals are available for flights leaving Monday to Thursday and on domestic flights many bargains can be found on a Saturday. Travelers will almost invariably pay more for a Friday or Sunday flight. Most holiday operators will offer the best deals for those who purchase a set time in advance, normally at least 14 days. If it is possible to stay a Saturday night, this will also normally result in a lower fare.

When searching, if possible, entertain the possibility of a flight that involves a connection. Airlines often place a large premium on non-stop flights and if this is not vital for you, you are likely to be able to save many dollars.

A further premium is normally placed on 'nice' flight times, i.e. ones that will not involve a particularly early start or involve traveling over night. Again if you are prepared to compromise slightly on your flight times, you may find that you can make huge savings.

Try not to stick rigidly to your destination. It may be possible to fly into a nearby airport and drive the last hour or so; this may offer you a better price overall.

Whenever you are considering buying a flight, it is always worth going to a consolidator such as Orbitz or Expedia. This will give you some excellent background information, such as the operators that offer the destination you are after and the typical prices. By doing your homework you will be able to act quickly when you see a bargain in the future. Very good deals often only appear for a very short period of time so it is important that you learn to recognize a good deal so that you can pounce on one-off deals before they disappear. When you are doing your homework, try a search with 'flexible dates'. This will allow you to get a good feel for the price differences that are in operation during your ideal travel period.

A few other hints that can help you to bag a flight bargain is to consider air courier travel. To be able to become a courier you will have to be very flexible, prepared to travel alone with very little luggage, but on the plus side you will get to travel to new places very cheaply.

Some countries offer air passes to tourists that allow discounts if you are planning on spending a lot of time traveling around a particular region such as Australia or Europe.

If you book an airline ticket and then find that the price has gone down, contact the airline and ask for a refund. Many of the large airlines offer to pay back the difference if the prices go down. Read the small print and ask for the refund if it applies. Even if your chosen airline does not offer this sort of refund policy it is still worth asking as with increased competition airlines are very keen to keep customers happy.

5. BARGAIN PACKAGE HOLIDAYS

Package holidays are simply holidays where the travel operator offers the whole trip, including the flights, hotels and in some cases the transport when you arrive at your destination. Bearing this in mind, a lot of the tips for getting cheap flights will be the same as they are for package holidays. Having said this, there are some specific ways of bagging a package holiday bargain.

The reason that many tour operators offer such cheap deals for packages is because they buy a certain number of flights and hotel rooms which they then try and sell throughout the year. By definition, they will have more possible holidays during peak season, but then there will also be greater demand meaning that the bargains may not be what you would hope.

Last minute package holidays are readily available if you are not fussy about destination and can wait until the very last minute. If you simply want somewhere hot, tomorrow, you will almost certainly bag a bargain; if you want a specific type of destination or resort then you may find that you are not able to get that last minute deal.

Optional extras are big business for package tour operators and they will often make most of their profit from these extras such as insurance, excursions and transport at your destination. Whilst these will often be available elsewhere cheaper, you may find that purchasing these from your package holiday operator will allow you to negotiate a discount on your holiday. You may even be able to get a 'free' extra if you agree to book on the spot.

Another thing to bear in mind is that accommodation is not the expensive part of the package and you will sometimes find that a package holiday to a particular destination will end up as a cheaper alternative to trying to book flights on their own. Last minute package deals are often so cheap that you can take the point of view that even if you hate the accommodation you can

always phone around for your chosen hotel. On a similar note, the best bargains are often those that are classified as 'allocation on arrival'. This simply means that you will be allocated accommodation when you arrive.

Some operators offer a halfway option where you will be told the resort, the type of hotel or the grade but the final selection will be done when you arrive.

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