



BUDGET VACATIONS

Just because you want to take some time off, it doesn't need to cost you a paycheck. The good thing about a "slow" economy is that many vacation properties, car rental companies and travel websites are offering incredibly good deals. Use the following tips to save a few extra bucks, and you might be surprised at how much vacation you can get on almost any budget.

BUNDLE, BUNDLE, BUNDLE.

Most online travel sites like travelocity.com offer options to bundle your airfare, car rental and hotel stay together. By booking everything in one place, you can save quite a bit of money. Of course, you save time and hassle, too, which means you get to start your vacation a little bit earlier. But always double check the airline's site. Many airline websites offer the best price because there's no booking fee.

ASK FOR HOTEL DISCOUNTS. THEN ASK FOR MORE.

Know one thing about hotels—rack rate is only for people who don't ask for a better rate. Almost every hotel discounts its rates. If you think you don't qualify for any discounts, get a AAA membership, and you'll probably save the membership fee in your first stay, alone. While you're at it, be sure to ask for a free room upgrade when you get there even if you've been given a discount. Many times, a hotel will give you an upgrade in hopes you'll become a regular customer. Also, don't forget free breakfasts, free nightly in-lobby wine and cheese, free Internet and free shuttle service to and from the airport.



BID DON'T BUY.

Being flexible on seasons and dates can lead to big savings. In addition, websites like priceline.com allow you to bid on flights, hotels and rental cars as long as exact times aren't important. And don't be afraid to bid low; you'd be amazed at how much you can save when you bid.

GO ALL INCLUSIVE.

Cruise lines and a number of major resort properties (especially the big ones like Sandals in the Caribbean) offer all-inclusive vacations. Sure, they look like a lot to pay up front, but by the time you factor in hotel nights, all your food and drinks, some activities and the incredible locations, they can actually be quite a deal. Especially in the off-season.



STAYCATIONS

Believe it or not, most people have never fully explored the 10-mile radius around their home. Check out what we've found, and maybe our suggestions will spark some "staycation" ideas of your own.

Visit a local museum. Many museums offer free admission on mid-week days and have free children's programs. We bet you'll be surprised at the number of museums in your area once you do a quick Google search.

Pack a picnic and go to a park. They're free and offer a great place to run around and play or just sit, relax and read a book.

Go camping. If you have kids, nothing beats backyard camping.

Visit a winery. If you're lucky enough to live near a winery or brewery, many of them offer free tastings. This is especially fun if you go with a group.

Go to meetup.com. This website has tons of activities sponsored by locals that give you the chance to (in their words), "Do something. Learn something. Share something. Change something."

Listen to live music. Many cities and towns offer great summer outdoor concert series. Check your local Chamber of Commerce's events calendar; you'd be surprised by how much is going on.

Take up a hobby like photography. It's a great way to learn something new and explore your own city in a new way.



VACATION CHECKLIST

You've probably seen these checklists before but can never find one when you're rushing to get out of town. Here's an idea: Cut this one out and stick it to the inside of a kitchen cabinet door. Then, you'll always know where it is.

KNOW WHAT'S IMPORTANT

If the location is important, make that your priority and find a hotel that has a fridge so that you can make simple breakfasts and lunches. Or save money on your rental car by using public transportation—most cities have an inexpensive all-day pass. Better yet, sites like digsville.com allow you to swap homes (and sometimes even cars) with people in other locations. There can be a fee, but it's usually less than \$50. Now, that's budget travel.

- Put random timers on the lights
- Put your mail "on-hold" from 3 to 30 days
- Arrange for a pet sitter
- Have a neighbor spend a little time in your home at night and even park in your driveway to make your place look less vacant
- Clean out your refrigerator
- Make sure all your favorite programs and games are set to record
- Pay bills or put them on auto-pay
- Make sure you have your travel documents, ID and tickets
- Close all windows and doors (including the garage) and lock them
- Organize your travel itinerary on tripit.com (having all your travel stuff in one place is incredible)