

Vacationing on a Shoestring

Written by Joy Venhorst
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When the days get longer and the weather gets warmer, many people want to take a break from their normal routine. Whether you're planning a week-long vacation or long weekend, planning a fun getaway doesn't have to be expensive. It is possible to take a vacation even during tough economic times. Below are some tips to save money on summer vacations:

- Start your planning with vacation goals and a budget. What would you like to do during your vacation? Relax on a beach or "see the sights" somewhere? The destination, planned activities, and length of a vacation will greatly affect the cost.
- To reduce the cost of vacation meals on road trips, plan to eat only one meal out a day, if possible. Pack foods such as granola bars, canned or dried fruits, and canned juices for breakfast, or select hotels that include a free continental breakfast. Many resorts and hotels offer deals (e.g., free breakfast, free Internet access, amusement park discounts, etc.) to attract visitors, especially in tough economic times.
- Another alternative is to pack some food in a cooler (or buy it when you arrive at your destination), and stay at hotels with a refrigerator and/or microwave oven in the room. The availability of a refrigerator and microwave lets you bring home "doggie bags" from a restaurant or order take-out food rather than a sit-down meal. Pack a few re-sealable food storage bags or plastic containers in your luggage.
- To keep food and beverages cold, freeze water in a cleaned milk jug. The frozen water will

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thaw slower than ice cubes, take up less space in a cooler, and keep things dry.

- On days that you must eat a meal out, consider dining out at lunchtime rather than dinner as the cost is often less. Beverages can add to the cost, so consider sticking with complimentary water. Consider sharing an entree, but check first to see if there is an additional charge for shared meals. Also, rather than order individual desserts at a restaurant, you may want to decide together on a shared dessert item such as a pie you can pick up at the supermarket to enjoy afterward.
- Additionally, some people save money by sharing vacation spots and expenses (including food) with family and/or friends, such as renting a multi-room condo or cottage and sharing the cost.
- In some areas, entertainment books or tourist guidebooks are full of coupons to save money on food such as buy-one/get-one-free meals or \$5 off a meal for two.
- Look for deals on airfare through Web sites such as www.kayak.com or from the “last minute deals” links on airline Web sites. Cheaper modes of travel may be to drive your own car or a rental car or take a train or bus if your destination is fairly close. Amtrak offers discounts on train fare to AAA members who book their trips in advance. College students may qualify for discounted airfares on Web sites like www.studentuniverse.com.
- If money is tight, become a “local tourist.” Visit your home county and/or state historical sites and learn about your heritage. Plan “daycations” (i.e., inexpensive one-day trips) and “staycations” (i.e., vacations at or near home) in lieu of vacation travel to distant areas. Focus on doing fun things together as a family or group of friends, no matter where the location.
- Look for discounts at resorts, theme parks, plays, museums, etc. Especially during economic downturns, entertainment providers may offer “deals” to attract customers.
- Shop around each time you take a vacation. Compare at least 3 competing product and service providers; e.g., car rental companies. Remember that, just because one company had

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the best deals once, doesn't mean that they always will.

- Make friends with “pet-friendly” neighbors. Trading pet-sitting services will eliminate the cost of kenneling a pet from your vacation budget.

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