

Travelling on a budget

Embarking on a dream holiday is fun, memorable and eye-opening. Here's how to do it without making too much of a dent in your bank account

WORDS Ferdinand Godinez

Open any social media platform these days and you're bound to be met with a flurry of wanderlust-fuelled images. We're travel obsessed and it's not hard to see why. But travel doesn't come cheap and it's not unheard of for some globetrotters to find themselves racking up the debt as they finance fancy getaways to one exotic location after another.

But it is possible to jet off to a desired destination without going broke. Don't believe us? Here are some helpful tips to saving money on that well-deserved holiday.



IT PAYS TO PLAN

Booking a holiday on a whim can be a big financial risk and it's not always the ideal way to start a dream vacation.

"When it comes to flying to popular destinations, advance planning goes a long way in saving on airfare. Start searching for flights at least three to four months before your trip," advises travel blogger Natasha Amar of thebohochica.com.

"Also, look at travelling to places during the shoulder season – this is between the peak and off-seasons. Often the flights are cheaper, the weather is still good enough to explore, but the crowds have left and the costs are significantly lower."

For flight prices, check comparative websites like Skyscanner, Momondo, FareCompare and Cheap Flights to get the best possible rate on plane tickets.

Major airlines including regional options like Emirates, Etihad, Air Arabia and Fly Dubai often announce discounts and package deals, so sign up for newsletters to be in the loop for announcements that could save you big bucks. These special offers usually expire within 48 hours or a week, so it pays to act quickly.

"In busy seasons such as the school summer holidays, avoid flying out and returning on

Fridays, as ticket fares will be higher on the weekends," Natasha notes.

"If you plan to travel during public holidays such as Eid, go a few days before the date of the holidays and return a few days after to avoid paying higher ticket fares. This means planning in advance to combine a few of your leave days with the public holiday so that you can make the most of your trip."

BEDDING DOWN

One major expense that you need to consider when travelling is your accommodation costs.

Interestingly, the hospitality business landscape has changed over the years with the emergence of various lodging options to rival international hotel brands.

From locally-owned guesthouses and boutique hotels to Airbnb apartments and private rooms in hostels, there are various options to suit your budget, often with unique offerings.

"Most cities are now home to interesting hotels that boast a certain kind of appeal – from heritage and art-themed hotels to family-run or vintage guesthouses. Looking beyond the usual hotel chains can mean that your stay becomes an exciting part of your trip," says Natasha.

"I've also found that there is a certain



personal touch to the service you get in such accommodations versus that at larger hotels.

Many Airbnb homes are also located in residential areas, giving guests the opportunity to experience first-hand the surrounding communities and get a feel for local life.

"I personally love to stay in apartments found on Airbnb. Some of these houses are creatively designed and are very luxurious for the price, so they are good value for money."

"Of course, staying in an Airbnb means that you cannot order room service and have to keep the space clean for as many days as you stay there – unless it's serviced – but it's still worth it."

If you're not into the idea of crashing in someone else's home, travel blogger Delaine Dcosta of oftravelsandtales.



DELAINE DCOSTA

weebly.com

recommends scouting hotel comparison websites to check prices.

"Compared to airline tickets, hotel prices do not really fluctuate and you can still hit the jackpot at the last minute," she confides.

"For boutique hotels or any unbranded hotels, we use booking.com. Create an account so you can benefit from extra discounts that are available only to members.

"As for hotel chains, it is best to book on the

hotel's website itself so that you can collect points that can later be used for free nights, early check-ins and upgrades. Personally, we love the InterContinental Hotel Group (IHG), Accor and Marriott reward programmes because they have a wide range of hotels catering to different budgets."

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

Part of the overall excitement of venturing into unknown territory is experiencing local cuisine. However, the cost of dining out can add up, especially if you're clueless about where to go.

"It's good to be spontaneous, but you have to be smart about choosing the right place to eat. Instead of sitting down for a meal at a touristy spot on the main shopping street, venture onto a parallel street or side alley.

And observe where locals are sitting down to eat – those places are likely to have good food at fair prices," comments Natasha.

Do your research in advance by checking local blogs and reviews to discover good but cheap outlets, and don't hesitate to ask hotel staff or your accommodation host for recommended food spots not frequented by tourists.

"When it comes to going on tours, apart from obvious things such as cost, look at the group size and see if you're comfortable with that," Natasha advises.

"Smaller group tours offer a greater chance to meet and bond with your group, to go at a relaxed pace and to approach your guides with questions, whereas a larger group size means you'll be quickly moving from one spot to another with little time to bond and relax."

It's also worth checking out tours centred around niche interests like art, food, architecture, spirituality or history, as these are sometimes cheaper, and often more interesting, than the usual tours.



NATASHA AMAR

Another practical option is to skip the group tours altogether and come up with your own itinerary.

"You have the flexibility to see just the things you want to see at your own pace," stresses Delaine.

"We prefer renting a car and driving around in places where we're comfortable or else using the train. At times, this works out cheaper. If you still want to book tours, compare the online price with that of local tour operators."

Natasha agrees, adding, "Take a bus or ferry like the locals do, eat at the same places and talk to locals.

"This will not only save on cost but you'll also have the chance to really connect with places and the excitement of sharing stories and delicacies with a family that you met on a local mini bus in Georgia sure beats riding from one attraction to the next on a tourist-packed coach."



More money-saving tips

GET A TRAVEL CARD

These are designed to be loaded with foreign currencies to save on excessive rates often charged by exchange houses. Banks like Emirates NBD or exchange centres such as Al Ansari and UAE Exchange offer these cards.

SHOP AROUND

If obtaining a travel card is not an option, enquire with various money exchange centres to make sure you get the best currency conversion rate when exchanging your dirhams.

ALWAYS GET TRAVEL INSURANCE

Delaine says, "It's the only thing that saves you when you miss your flight, lose your luggage or many other travel mishaps."

PACK LIGHT

"No matter how long your trip is, packing for a week to ten days should give you enough outfits," Natasha says. "Remember, people do laundry all over the world and it's cheaper to do your laundry a few times than pay excess baggage fees."

RECONSIDER THAT SOUVENIR

It can be tempting to load up on keepsakes but these things cost money that you could spend on an experience. "Don't buy what you don't need, no matter how cute or unique it is," advises Natasha.

