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Calgary travel expert shares secrets for spending less on vacations

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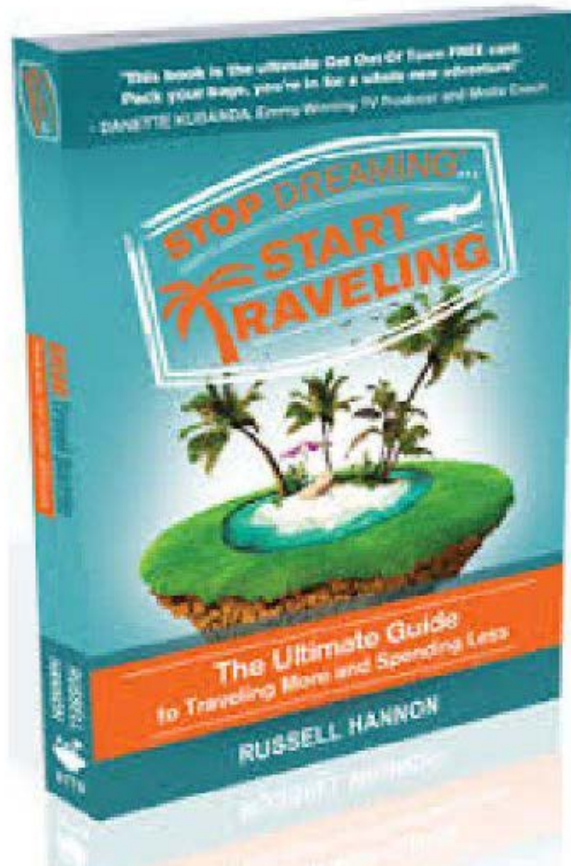
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Local Input- Hotel sign for a two star hotel // UNDATED -- travel tourist tourism recreation traveling luxury - two star hotel CREDIT: FOTOLIA (FOR NATIONAL POST USE ONLY - ROYALTY FREE STOCK IMAGE)/pws UNKNOWN / TOM DAVISON - FOTOLIA



If you found yourself returning home from your summer vacation to a big bill, you'll want to hear what Calgary-based ultra-economical travel expert Russell Hannon has to say. The author of *Stop Dreaming Start Traveling* says your last vacation likely cost you five times more than it needed to because travel is an industry that charges on average five times the local cost of living. Hannon explains that the average three-star hotel room that goes for \$160 a night costs five times more than the average one-bedroom apartment down the street that rents out for \$900/month. That works out to just \$30 a night. Same goes with eating out three times a day while travelling, over the long haul that will add up to five times your at-home grocery bill.



Stop Dreaming Start Traveling, new book by Russell Hannon *CALGARY HERALD*

Here's are five budget travel tips from Hannon:

1. One of the most common questions I get is, When is the best time to book a flight? The answer is it doesn't matter if you fly with an airline such as WestJet that offers a price-drop guarantee. It's a benefit that few people take advantage of. What I recommend is once you book your flight, set up the details of your flight at airfarewatchdog.com with instructions to notify you any time the posted fare for your flight drops 10 per cent below the price you paid. If you get a price drop notification, contact WestJet Customer support that same day and forward them the email showing the lower fare. If the agent can independently replicate the fare and its for an identical class and itinerary, you will be entitled to a refund of the difference between what you paid and the lower price. If this sounds like too much work, I offer a free guide at breakthetravelbarrier.com titled Beat the Best Online Fare — Every Time, Every Flight. It shows you how to do exactly that in 15 minutes flat.

2. Many people sign up to e-coupons with companies like Groupon or LivingSocial.com to get discount coupons at home, but don't think about ways to leverage them while travelling. I suggest that two weeks prior to your trip, change the hometown in your account to the destination you'll be visiting, and you'll get e-mails with discount coupons that target locals that tourists are often unaware of. These can include 2 for 1s and discounts upwards of 30 to 40 per cent. If you're a Costco member, stop into a Costco at your destination for \$100 gift certificates for restaurants and attractions that sell for \$80. Anytime I have friends visit Alberta to ski, I always make sure they buy their ski passes at Costco because they sell for 33 per cent less on average. I do the same when travelling to other places.


3. To get the best possible Priceline rate for hotels, you can, "out- negotiate the Priceline negotiator," a platform where you bid on how much you are willing to pay for a category of hotel room in a certain area. The problem is that Priceline requires you to enter your credit card information before you submit your bid, and if Priceline accepts your bid, it automatically charges a non-refundable booking to your credit card. To get around this, you can bid on rooms using a Visa gift card with a balance that is lower than your bid amount. If Priceline accepts your bid, you will get a pop up window that says "Priceline could not process your order," then you submit a lower bid and continue on that way until Priceline rejects it. "This way you will know the best possible Priceline rate and you can then use your credit card to get the best possible Priceline rate and not a penny more. There are a few hoops to jump through, such as having to wait 24 hours before submitting a second bid using identical criteria. I make it easy to navigate these obstacles by outlining step-by-step workarounds in my book Stop Dreaming Start Traveling.

4. Roaming: Contrary to popular media, the best roaming plans are not those you see advertised on TV. For Canadians visiting the U.S. and Mexico, roamability.com will mail you a SIM card for \$20 with a local phone number that's yours to keep. Before your trip, purchase a pre-paid plan online then insert the SIM into your phone when you arrive. You can extend or top up your plan anytime from anywhere by going to the website. I recommend sticking to data only plans which go for just over \$15/week in the U.S., and \$25 in Mexico. Between Skype, e-mail and social media, it isn't worth paying extra for text and talk when data gives you all three. Next time you visit Europe, LeFrenchMobile offers a great value multi-lingual prepaid SIM card mailed to you before your trip. Rates are comparable to plans offered by local carriers re-posted on their homepage at lefrenchmobile.com.


5. To get around pesky luggage fees, bring a luggage jacket as your second carry on bag. When the time comes to board the plane, the luggage jacket unfolds into a jacket that you can wear. Jaktogo.com offers various versions for men and women that unfold into a trench coat and there is another model that unfolds into a poncho. They are loaded with pouches and pockets so that you can pack anything from your computer to clothes or shoes. If this option does not appeal to you, here's another suggestion. Since you need to have a credit card to book travel online, the WestJet World Elite MasterCard is the best overall value Canadian travel credit card. It entitles WestJet fliers who use the card to pay for their flight to a complimentary checked bag and an annual companion pass where they can bring a guest with them for an additional \$99 anywhere in Canada and the Continental U.S.. When you factor in a \$250 WestJet flight credit as a sign up bonus and WestJet dollars earned per dollar spent, this card is a slam dunk.

Russell Hannon is a travel expert with breakthetravelbarrier.com. Once feeling unable to afford to travel, Russell applied lean principles to travel at a fraction of the going rate. He has since been featured on America Tonight, CTV, CNBC, Around the World Travel TV and he's written the book, Stop Dreaming Start Traveling.

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