



## A Few Solid Tips for Lowering Your Travel Budget

By [Tim Leffel](#) On July 26, 2017 4 Comments



**airbelin – \$578: Miami – Prague, Czech Republic. Roundtrip, including all Taxes**

A good sale to Prague Sample Travel Date: November 14th – 21st This is just ONE SAMPLE travel date, for more availability, please follow the "Fare..."

I've said many times on this blog that traveling on a budget is a mindset more than a collection of tips and tricks. If you just spend 10 bucks on my still-relevant *Make Your Travel Dollars Worth a Fortune* book and follow the principles there, you'll be ahead of at least 80% of the general public. The tools and websites change, but the general strategies do not. In the end you need to maintain flexibility, shop around intelligently, work the mileage programs, and then slow down the itinerary.

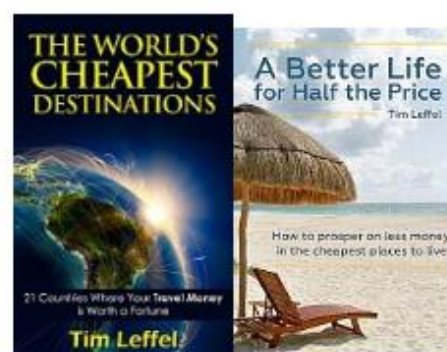


Another author who shares this philosophy is Russell Hannon. He spoke at the travel bloggers conference TBEX about getting media appearances, so you may have seen him on TV shows or heard him on the radio. His book is called *Stop Dreaming, Start Traveling* and it's a worthy investment if you're one of those people sighing, "I wish I could travel more..." (You can [get it on Amazon here](#).)

The main premise of this book is, "You can." The travel media and the industry itself conspires against you to make you feel like travel has to be expensive. The players with a vested interest—which includes the glossy magazines like *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Afar*—want you to drain your savings once a year or rack up hefty credit card bills. (*Departures* and *Travel + Leisure* magazines are both owned by American Express.) Note how many articles and ads feature the words "deal" or "bargain" but involve prices that any normal person would consider a major splurge.



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Here are a few strategies, as well as some tips that go with them, that both of us like for getting the best possible price.

### What Would I Do if I Lived Here?

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When you're at home and not traveling, you're probably not blowing wads of cash every day. You don't eat out every meal, you don't feel you have to cram something into every hour of your day, and you probably take advantage of things that are free.



Get into the habit of thinking more like a local where you are and you'll probably spend a lot less. Get a local bus or metro pass. Figure out the free museum times and when there are free or cheap concerts. Take a hike. Eat at cheapo local dining joints. Ask a random stranger what they do for fun around here. Splurge on things that are worth it to you, but don't feel pressured to cram your days with tourist attractions.

Russell says, "Most travelers spend five times more than they need to because the travel industry charges, on average, five times the local cost of living."

If you walk into a restaurant in Italy that's filled with foreign tourists, you know you're in the wrong place.

## Don't Pay Inflated Prices When You Just Need Food or Water

Eating out is expensive in a lot of countries and a few meals out in a row can really put a dent in your budget. Here are a few tips that can make a big difference over time:

– Get a room with a fridge. Russell says this is often available for the asking with a phone call or front desk request. This way you can grocery shop for a wider selection of food to have in your room. If there's a microwave too, even better. Is there a coffee pot but crappy coffee? Buying your own and brewing it over several days is still cheaper than Starbucks.

– Use a [SteriPEN](#), [Grayl](#), or other purifier if you're in a country where you can't drink the water. If shunning tap water is just a matter of taste and you're on a car trip, bring a [Brita filter pitcher](#) or buy bottled water in the largest possible containers.

– When you do eat out, can you get more for what you spend? Groupon and local equivalents can save you a bundle. Apply your credit card to a mileage/points dining program and you could edge closer to a free flight/room. Russell also buys chain restaurant gift cards on his mileage credit card, sometimes at a face value discount at Costco.

– Bring along food on flight days so you're not paying inflated rates at the airport. Snacks and drinks are an especially bad deal in airport convenience stores, often double or triple what you would pay if you weren't trapped. If you've got a long layover, paying for lounge access could be a wash or better if you want to have a few drinks and are hungry.

– Included breakfast at a hotel is a beautiful thing. Eat late enough and you may not need lunch. If you don't get free breakfast, that's the easiest meal to self-cater from a grocery store, then remember that lunch in a restaurant is almost always cheaper than dinner. In Latin American countries the locals chow down on their biggest meal in the afternoon, plus it's often a terrific value.

## Rise to the Challenge of Getting a Good Flight Deal

Despite what any website tells you, there's no one site that will always get you the cheapest flight. You absolutely, positively have to shop around. Or even better, wait for the best deals to come to you. We're both big fans of [Skyscanner](#) and Google Flights since they show you the options for many different providers. (Like Trivago does for hotels.) That's still not the end of the story, however.

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– See if there's a [budget airline serving that route](#). It may not be obvious, like Norwegian Air between California and Ireland, or Spirit Air from Florida to Colombia. Volaris, Interjet, and Southwest fly [to Mexico](#). Many budget airline sites don't share info with the big booking sites. You have to poke around. Start with the official airport site for where you're going to see who flies there. Don't forget about alternate airports nearby.



– You can combine two destinations on one flight with a stopover on the way. In his book, Russell even outlines how to make your home city the stopover, essentially taking two trips but getting some fresh clothes and some sleep in your own bed in between. This will probably require a phone call and maybe a little extra payment on top. However, some airlines like Copa and Iceland Air allow multi-day stopovers in Panama and Iceland, respectively, with no extra charge or change fee.

– If you're waiting for a flight to get cheap enough before you pounce, then set up a fare alert to come to your e-mail. You can do this with SmarterTravel, most of the booking sites like [Skyscanner](#). Usually you search for a combination and you get prompted to set up a fare alert. Or you can watch for ultra-cheap "mistake fares" on sites like [SecretFlying](#) or [TheFlightDeal](#). One trick some people use is to set up a recipe on If This Then That such as "When @secretflying tweets a fare from New York to Italy that's less than \$400, send me a DM by Twitter."

– The best flight deal is a free one of course, or close to it. This year alone I've booked round-trip flights to Europe and South America on miles and booked ones to Mexico and Belize the second half of last year. Most of the [miles earned for those free flights](#) didn't come from flying. They came from credit card sign-up bonuses and spending points. If you're not playing this game, you're missing out on a lot of potential travel where all you have to pay is the taxes and fees.

There are plenty of tricks and tips in [Stop Dreaming, Start Traveling](#) that I don't have the space to go into here. But you can learn about how a spa day pass can be cheaper than a hotel for odd hours resting, how to e-mail yourself a future reminder on when to buy an advance ticket (great for cheap bus lines and RyanAir), or how to buy plane tickets in other countries to get a currency advantage.

## Comments



Gary

07/29/2017 · Reply

Tim,

I've taken your advice so many times, and your insights have made for so many memorable and enjoyable journeys, all whilst being easy on the wallet. Thanks for all you do to inform and bring to light perspectives to enhance travel.

Gary



TIM LEFFEL

07/30/2017 · Reply

Thanks for your support Gary—I appreciate it!



IZY BERRY

08/14/2017 · Reply

Credit card spending points have saved me so much money too!



HARRY

08/30/2017 · Reply

Thanks for this tips. I am on a tight budget but I still want to travel.

A vertical advertisement for Nestlé. At the top, there is a blue header with a white speech bubble icon containing a heart and the text "Remember Sleep?". Below this is a close-up photograph of a baby's face with large, blue eyes. Underneath the photo is a white box with the text "Get expert advice on parenthood." and an orange "Join now" button. At the bottom, the Nestlé logo is displayed with the tagline "Start Well Stay Well." and a small "MEDIAPINE Report this ad" icon.