

21 countries where your travel dollars are worth a fortune.

**The World's Cheapest Destinations**

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*21 Countries Where Your Dollars are  
Worth a Fortune*

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*By Tim Leffel*



For Alina  
*May her passport have many stamps...*

### **Acknowledgements**

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## ***It's Not How You Go, but Where!***

Yes, traveling overseas can be expensive, but only to *get* there. The key to living well abroad is not airline specials, discount hotel vouchers, or finding the cheapest restaurant in Rome or Paris. The way to really travel well without spending your life savings is to go to where your first world dollars are worth a fortune.

For the price of a bed in a tiny dorm in Japan you can get a beautiful double room in a hotel with a pool in many parts of Southeast Asia. For the price of dinner for two in western Europe, you could pig out for a whole week in Indonesia, Nepal or India. For the \$7.50 you'd pay for one beer in a bar in Oslo, you could buy a round of beers for yourself and about ten friends in Istanbul, Prague, or Saigon.

Most books won't tell you that. They'll tell you things such as how to fly as a courier, how to save money with coupons and Internet specials, or how you can save on lodging by using overnight trains. Guidebooks will tell you what a certain country or region will cost, but they seldom compare those costs to other destinations. Even by scouring the Web for days on end, you'd be hard pressed to find any resource that will tell you where the cheapest countries are and which places offer the best value.

While all the practical advice on budgeting and finding a good deal is useful, it doesn't help so much if the destination is expensive to start with. If you're worried about money the whole time you're traveling or are thinking about how much your dinner is setting you back while you're eating it, you're probably not enjoying the experience very much. A \$40 "bargain" meal in Paris is still \$40, which will feed you for a week in the most of the countries I've featured here.

A couple can travel around the countries in this book for \$400 to \$1,000 a month at the budget end, anywhere from \$650 to \$2,500 a month staying in mid-range hotels and taking the best available ground transportation. Compare that to what you normally spend for a one-week vacation at some beach resort or in Paris—or even what you spend just to pay your regular bills at home. Some homeowner travelers we met were

renting out their house or condo while they were traveling and were spending less than the profit that was coming in!

There are several ironies that work in your favor when you travel on the cheap. First, many of the world's most awe-inspiring sights are located in the world's cheapest countries. Think of all the great man-made monuments: The Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramids, Macchu Pichu, Petra, Borobudour, Aya Sofia, Ankor Wat, and all the Roman ruins scattered outside Rome. Or if you prefer natural wonders, you can explore the most unspoiled rain forests, go white water rafting on raging rivers, hike up volcanoes, kayak around some of the world's prettiest beaches, or go trekking in the Himalayas (just to name a few).

Secondly, the less money you spend in any given location, the more likely you are to interact with the people who actually live there instead of just other tourists. You'll also get much better deals on everything than your "Eastern Europe in Seven Days" counterparts. These vacationers seal themselves in familiar chain hotels, travel in packs, and do everything in a hurry, including their shopping. With a little bit of effort, you can spend a tenth of what they do and have a better time as well.

If you visit the destinations listed in this guide, you'll eat great meals, experience mind-blowing things, meet people you'll never forget, and come back with photos that'll amaze your friends and family—probably for less than you spend each month to put a roof over your head. If you work, volunteer, or study abroad, you'll spend even less and get the education of a lifetime.

### **Hey, You Missed a Spot!**

There are notable omissions in this booklet, including plenty of places where you could travel around for less than \$20 a day. I have my reasons though. Cheap destinations such as Colombia, Yemen, and half of the African continent are perpetually on the US State Department's "warning list" due to a dangerous climate for travelers. I'm not endorsing that overly paranoid list, but some places just aren't worth the risk.

Some third world destinations offer cheap grub and accommodations, but little of interest for non-missionaries or Peace

Corps workers. Many of these countries are also a royal pain to get around unless you have your own vehicle (and plenty of cash for roadblock bribes).

Others, such as Romania and Poland, are only mentioned in passing because frankly, their neighbors have much more to offer for the price. Still others are tucked away in some remote corner of the world—you'll have the thrill of discovering those all on your own. I've tried to mention other countries worth checking out in each of the continent introductions, but hopefully the destinations listed here provide a wide enough range for everyone.

### **The V.F.A.Q. (Very Frequently Asked Questions)**

I've been to almost 30 countries myself and have talked with hundreds of travelers that have been to others I missed. Nearly anyone who travels to distant, exotic lands can expect the following questions from curious relatives and friends, especially if they're American or Canadian. (Unlike the citizens of most other developed countries, we tend to have little vacation time to travel). I'm guessing you may have some of the same questions yourself:

#### **1) Don't you have to learn the local language?**

In some places it helps a great deal (especially Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe). In others (like Thailand) it's barely worth trying unless you're going to put down roots. In India and Nepal, anyone who has been to school speaks English. Outside the latter two, a phrase book should stay in your pocket, however, especially if you'll be in rural areas or eating in working-class eateries. Learning a bit of the local language will certainly enhance your experience if you'll be in one country for a while. You'll also get ripped off less if you learn the local numbers and how to bargain. Among the educated, the business people, and those who depend on tourists for a living, however, English rules.

## **2) Don't you need reservations for hotels?**

In close to 1,000 nights of lodging, one night we couldn't find a room (so we took a bus to the next town). Three or four times we had to suck it up and pay for a more expensive room than we expected. This generally only happens if there's a local festival or a national holiday, you're in Europe during the summer, or if you're in an area where there's only one hotel.

Make a reservation for the night you'll get off the plane if you won't be arriving during daylight. Read a guidebook and find out if there's a crunch for rooms in certain towns. Otherwise, be aware of what's going on locally and you'll be fine.

## **3) How can you afford to travel for so long?**

Tell someone you're going overseas for a few weeks to a year and they automatically think you've gotten an inheritance or an overseas job. The latter is a great experience, but not necessary for anyone with a bit of savings. The airfare is the big expense, but after that you can stretch your dollars a long way. Some backpackers go for months on \$1,500 and in some places you'd have to try really hard to spend over \$40 a day. During my three-week Himalayan trek in Nepal, for example, I spent a total of \$180, despite eating my fill and having a real bed to sleep on each night. If I'd spent as much as I possibly could, I *might* have been able to blow \$50 more.

## **4) Isn't it really dangerous in \_\_\_\_\_?**

Most people that ask you this remember hearing about some kidnapping five years ago or had a friend of a friend of a friend who had some traveler's checks stolen from their bag once. Meanwhile, the person asking you just watched stories about two murders and a carjacking on their local TV news and thought nothing of it.

Let's face it, the US has one of the highest crime rates on Earth and Canada's record isn't too stellar either these days. Somewhere between 50 and 100 million people travel out of their own country each year and a miniscule fraction experience real crime. Apart from visiting the Colombias and Congos of the world, you're as likely to suffer harm in

your own neighborhood or driving to work than you are by traveling overseas. Yes, you need to keep your wits about you, avoid scams, and don't make it easy for pickpockets. Learn which cities to get in and out of quickly (Tangiers, Mexico City, and Caracas for a start), and don't walk around decked out in Rolex and Prada. Sometimes it's good to be grubby. Read news from an overseas source and find out what's going on locally.

In four years overseas, however, the only significant problems we suffered were two stolen cameras and one of those was stolen by another traveler. This includes three months in Indonesia during Suharto's downfall. Most people I know have done worse at home.

### **Costs of Getting There and Around**

On my first trip around the world, the two of us spent \$1800 each on airfare, then traveled for seven months on only \$4500 more. (We got a job for the next five months.) That's lodging, two or three restaurant meals every day, trains, buses, ferries, sightseeing, motorcycle rentals, outdoor adventures—you name it. After airfare, that comes out to less than \$650 a month for two people. The average budget stayed pretty similar on our two other trips around the globe.

The airline ticket, which would be around the same price today, allowed us to go completely around the world, flying in and out of Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Kathmandu, Bombay, and Athens before flying home from London. (See the accompanying web site for agencies that offer this kind of package.) We picked up a ticket from Istanbul to Amsterdam for \$110 along the way.

The next time we circled the globe, we made our way to Bangkok (by buying a ticket from a discounter) and then bought our other plane tickets as we went. This worked out well since we were now experienced and it kept us from being locked into any certain itinerary or time frame. Either way, you won't go wrong if you shop around.

How much time you spend traveling will have a big impact on costs, since traveling from country to country is usually far cheaper than the flight from home to start with. Also, if you're not trying to rush around, you'll settle into a local routine in some spots and learn where the

bargains are. So the longer you are away, the lower your average monthly tab will come out to be.

### **How Much You'll Need**

Take all estimates on daily expenses presented in this book as a rough guideline—a lot of it depends on your personal comfort level. Some backpackers will spend \$5 a day in southern India and consider themselves to be living better than they do at home. After all, they're being waited on for three meals a day in restaurants. Others may spend \$50 a day and complain that the TV doesn't get CNN. I've tried to provide a wide enough margin to accommodate for this and to give two ranges. The "backpackers" budget is for those who use basic rooms with a fan, take a lot of local transport, and eat where the locals do a good bit of the time, especially outside Southeast Asia. In some places they'll use a communal kitchen. For the countries in this book, \$400 to \$1000 per month for two people should cover it.

The "mid-range" budget considers nicer rooms with a private bath and A/C where available, restaurants that are a step up from the bottom tier, and tourist buses or train classes in most areas. This varies widely by country.

Of course there's lots of overlap: most backpackers will splurge now and then on things that give them pleasure and most mid-range travelers will sleep in a \$2 bamboo beach bungalow if it's clean and in a nice location. Some people are backpackers where it's more expensive and turn into mid-range travelers when they get to a place like Indonesia, where the difference between a hovel and a palace can be a dollar or two.

Note that a person traveling alone will spend more than a person sharing rooms with someone else will. I've referred to two people as a "couple" in this book, but that can be two friends who have arrived together or just two people that met up and are traveling together to save on expenses. A couple can usually travel on 1.5 times what a single person does, due to room shares, taxi shares, and splitting some meal items. It's also safer at times and makes for better bargaining; there's definitely strength in numbers.

All prices are quoted in US dollars. That's not me being an ugly American—it's the reality of the global marketplace. In a few spots it

pays to carry some pounds sterling, but dollars can be exchanged nearly everywhere on the globe.

### **What's the Catch?**

“If it sounds too good to be true, it must be” the saying goes. Another saying says, “everything in life is a trade-off,” which is probably more apt for this situation. In essence, these countries are cheap because they're not nearly as rich as first-world nations such as Japan, the US, Canada, and most of Europe. As a result, you'll surely encounter inept and corrupt government officials, you'll find that departure times are rarely more than rough estimates, you often can't drink the tap water, and you certainly won't have the vast choices and conveniences you're used to at home.

You'll also find scary bathrooms and you may need shots to prevent scarier diseases. You'll probably find the idea of renting a car and playing chicken with the local highway drivers to be a bit too adventurous.

Each negative usually has a corresponding positive, however. You won't find miles of bland strip malls and parking lots. You'll be forced to try new food and customs, some of which you'll end up really liking. You'll learn something about other religions and traditions that doesn't come from a textbook or a news soundbite. You'll read and hear news with a whole different perspective. And you'll see your own country through others' eyes—something it wouldn't hurt our elected leaders to do once in a while. Lastly, you'll appreciate what you have and realize that most of the world's people lead happy lives having just a fraction of what we spend our money on.

### **Kids**

I haven't made any notes about traveling with little children in the chapters. I have a toddler and I love her dearly, but I wouldn't think of taking her on crappy third-world buses, pumping her full of malaria pills, exposing her to aggressive deformed beggars, or trying to ward off touts while simultaneously keeping her occupied. Not to mention what would end up in her mouth!

But that's just me. Plenty of people feel differently, though some major adjustments should at least be made. For a start, slow down your pace, narrow your geography, and bring enough money to ensure some privacy and safety.

Once they're old enough and well adjusted enough to know which way the wind blows, you should be able to take kids to any of these places and have a good time. You can find some recommended books on the web site listed in the appendix.

### **Vegetarians**

Where applicable, I've tried to address what the situation is like for vegetarians or those who only eat seafood. My wife fits this category, so I know how tough it can be at times. In some places (mostly in Asia) it's no sweat and in India and Nepal it's standard. In others places it means very limited choices or some form of bread, rice, beans, or cheese. If you're a vegan, you'll either need to change your eating habits in many places or forget eating hot meals: restaurants in many of these countries are so cheap that virtually no budget hotels have kitchens. You'll have trouble straying from the "gringo trails" of the world. There are some good books and resources out there though, which I've listed on the accompanying Web site. ([www.worldscheapestdestinations.com](http://www.worldscheapestdestinations.com)).

Understand that in nearly all developing countries outside the Indian subcontinent, being a vegetarian means you can't afford to buy meat. It's beyond the locals' comprehension that you would forgo it on purpose.

### **Gay/Lesbian Travelers**

I haven't addressed the situation for gay and lesbian travelers at all in the individual chapters, but I've provided some good resources on the Web site. In general, it's easier for women everywhere and easier for men in Asia and parts of the Middle East, where friends commonly walk down the street holding hands. Latin America and parts of Eastern Europe can be tough, though every country has its scene—the difference is how underground you need to go.

Simply being discreet will avoid a lot of problems. In most countries profiled here, modesty rules. Even married couples will attract a lot of attention if they're overly public with their affections.

Conversely, there are plenty of people sharing a room with someone of the same sex for economic reasons, so you won't attract attention simply by traveling together.

### **Next Steps**

This book is meant to be a primer, an overview, and a jumping-off point. It can't possibly take the place of a thick, general travel advice guide, or a guidebook for a specific destination or region. What this book will do is give you a little flavor of the destination, give you an idea how much you'll spend there, and help you get a feel for where you'd like to go.

If this book gets you excited enough to go somewhere that's featured, do your homework before you leave. Figure out if there's a bad time for weather. Figure out how much you can reasonably see in the time you've set aside and leave plenty of wiggle room. Read lots of advice on what to pack and what to do. Make sure you've taken care of what happens to any bills and mail while you're gone. Figure out where your credit or debit card will work where you're going and whether you can cash traveler's checks outside of the cities. I've listed lots of resources on the Web site, but the Lonely Planet site, at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com), is generally the best place to start, especially since there are updates written by travelers on the road.

I've addressed visas in a few spots, but you'll need to research this as well. In many Latin American countries, Americans and Canadians don't need one at all, but in other parts of the world you could shell out \$50 or more for a visa that's only good for a limited period. Some visas you can get upon arrival just for coughing up the cash, but in others it takes several days or more for a background check.

This book should give you a good overview of the world's best travel deals. In the back you'll find places to go for more detailed information, including where to go to find some of the best sources on the Web.

So stop dreaming, start reading, and begin planning--it's cheaper and easier than you think!

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