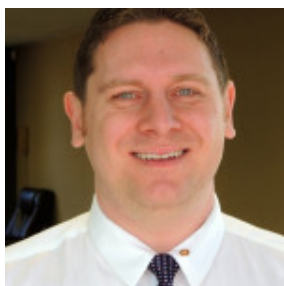


Money Matters: Don't go broke on vacation

By Nic Abelow

Everyone needs a vacation periodically. Breaking the routine of the workaday world is not only refreshing, but studies show it is good for you and your ability to do a better job. Reducing job stress can lead to more productivity.



Nic Abelow

It's easy to spend a lot of money on a vacation, but that guarantees neither a good time nor vacation value. With a little planning, you can have a great time and still avoid breaking your budget.

Vacation value

Whether you find a vacation value or just a vacation depends, of course, on whether you find the kinds of places, activities, and people that meet your needs. For instance, a wonderful buy at Disneyland is little value to a couple who prefers to spend a week on the ski slopes.

Here are some tips to trim costs and get more value for your vacation dollar:

Plan ahead. You may get the kind of vacation you want at the time and place you want if you book your transportation and accommodations in advance. You'll also have time to put aside

money to pay for the trip without using high-interest credit cards at the last minute.

Budget for your vacation spending. Figure out how much your vacation will cost, add in the fun extras, and then start saving so you don't run up a credit card bill. If you don't have ready cash, but you simply must get away to keep your sanity, check out getting a bank installment loan rather than using plastic. Interest charges will be lower, and the debt will be paid back in a set period of time rather than revolving on your credit card bill.

Book your flight in advance. The difference in airfare alone can amount to hundreds of dollars, especially when you purchase tickets 14 days in advance and you travel Tuesday through Thursday. Flight bargains like these are offered for limited time periods and tend to sell out early. You have to check with the airlines often or have a travel agent who watches out for you.

Buy your vacation cruise well in advance. Cruise-line owners want to make sure their ships are booked. The difference in price can be substantial between a purchase made in November versus one made in January.

Selected Travel Resources

Trip booking. Look for "deals" and "discounts" pages on Hotwire, Travelocity, Kayak, Priceline

Short-term apartment and home rentals may offer better values than hotel rooms: HomeAway, AlluraDirect.

A good guide can help point you toward the best values: Lonely Planet, Rick Steves, Frommer's.

Travel packages. Some people want to wander on their own and are willing to pay for it. But a vacation package that includes airfare, hotel, and admissions to local attractions can be very attractive.

With hotel accommodations and vacation packages, you can often save with last-minute flexibility as there are frequently great vacation values available on short notice. You may be able to get last-minute specials – unsold seats on flights or accommodations at holiday resorts – for a discount.

Off-season, off-peak, and midweek values. Golfers can rent luxury suites in resorts such as Palm Springs, Scottsdale, and South Florida in the summer for a fraction of their winter prices. The first two weeks in December may also offer prices that are almost as good. Packed during ski season, resorts such as Aspen, Vail, and others offer lower-priced summer packages with activities ranging from whitewater rafting to bike and Jeep tours, horseback riding, and balloon rides. Contact the resort directly and make these reservations early because good deals go fast.

And think midweek and off-peak. You'll avoid crowds and save up to 50 percent. The Caribbean islands are beautiful year-round, but a week's stay on St. Thomas in November or June costs considerably less than a week in February. In addition to the money saved off-season, there are fewer tourists in town, leaving more room in the duty-free shops and on the beaches. Dates for the high season vary by location, so check with your travel agent or resort website.

Take advantage of discounts. If you're a member of a fraternal or special-interest group, you can often save 10 percent or more on the cost of expenses such as car rentals and hotel accommodations.

Cash in on the competition among airlines by watching out for airline advertisements urging you to take advantage of drastically reduced promotional fares. These offers may require advance purchase, allowing you time to plan a vacation around the best value offered. Also be sure to check major airline websites, which often offer additional discounts on advertised discount fares and have web-only specials.

Be aware that you can be charged more if the airline fare goes up after you make your reservation. Therefore, it's advisable that you pay for the tickets as soon as possible to lock in the fare.

By the way, airlines don't have to give you a refund if the fare drops after you've bought tickets, although some will do so. Keep on the lookout for lowered fares, and request a refund or credit voucher if your fare drops.

Distance can save you money. You don't have to be right near an attraction to enjoy it.

Skiers can save substantially on lodging by staying farther away from a mountain resort rather than within walking distance of the lifts. If you must stay on the mountain, know that midweek rates are generally lower than weekend rates. The same is true for popular vacation attractions like Disneyland: lodging outside rather than inside the park can result in savings.

Sometimes the lower-cost approach, however, may not give you the most value. Renting a condo at a ski resort may be more expensive than staying in an off-attraction hotel, but when you balance the price against the costs of a rental car, the time spent driving, and the inconvenience – especially if you're traveling with children – it may be a better choice. The bottom line is that a little advance planning can go a long way in making your vacation a fun-filled – and affordable – experience.

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