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Planning a summer escape? 23 ways to get away as a family without breaking the bank

By Melissa Leong

It's hard for families to save money on travel, but it can be done. Some of Canada's foremost travel experts share their best money-saving hacks

Lauren Reimer and her three sons, aged 10, 12 and 14, are seasoned travellers.

"I remember the days when I'd travel with my three boys - one would be four, one would be two, and one a newborn. I was travelling to France with three car seats and a stroller," the Toronto resident says. "(Now,) I'm not taking my three boys out of school. So I have to rely on taking them during summer and Christmas holidays. It can get expensive."

It's not easy for families to save money on travel. First of all, you're likely vacationing at peak times. Secondly, you're often looking for shorter, non-stop flights, which limits your options. Then if you're travelling with wee ones, you've got the challenge of packing extra stuff and possibly facing extra baggage charges.

To help, we consulted Reimer - who is well-informed both as a mom and as managing director and general manager at Expedia Canada - and several of Canada's foremost travel experts for their best money-saving hacks.

Begin with a budget to determine when, where and how you can travel. For ideas, travel search engine KAYAK has a feature that allows you to simply set the amount you want to spend on airfare and it will show you how far your dollar will get you. Don't forget to include money for incidentals, last minute activities and souvenirs.

Citing research, Reimer says to **book your travel over the weekend or on Tuesdays**. "Hotels and airlines tend to release their better deals over the weekend."

Last minute booking isn't always an option for families. The alternative is to **book super early**. For travel within North America, Reimer books at least 60 to 90 days in advance and six months in advance when going to Europe. "The savings are in the range of 10 per cent to 25 per cent if you book early," she says

Some hotel chains guarantee the lowest price when you book with them. If you find a lower price for the same hotel and date on another online source, Choice Hotels (Comfort Inn, Quality Inn) and InterContinental Hotels Groups (Holiday Inn, Crowne Plaza) will match the price and offer one free night. Meanwhile, Best Western will give you a \$100 gift card if you find a lower price. "Last year, I was able to get four free stays in Vancouver, New York City and Seattle because I found lower prices elsewhere," says Steve Zussino who runs CanadianTravelHacking.com¹.

Contact the hotel and **let the front desk know that you're travelling with kiddies** and they may provide you with amenities other than a crib; some even have blenders to puree food or bottle warmers. "They may offer diaper pails or games for the kids to play with," says Stephanie Retcho, a spokesperson for KAYAK. That could save you precious space in your luggage.



Airports have become a lot stricter with their baggage allowances. **Try to minimize your luggage** and even dare the miraculous feat of bringing only a carry-on. "I will pack clothes for my three boys into one piece of luggage," Reimer says. "I found families tend to overpack." Apply packing tips such as rolling your clothes, filling your shoes and wearing your bulkiest items.

Air Canada, for example, charges \$100 per direction if your bag is overweight and/or oversized. **Invest in a luggage scale** so you can avoid that awful scene where you're digging through your suitcase in the terminal to remove the equivalent of two pounds.

Most airlines allow you to check baby equipment such as carseats and strollers for free. **So consider taking your own car seats.** I once decided to rent two car seats from a car rental shop while staying in Miami for a week. Not only did the seats cost me \$10 each per day but they were in rough shape and it was stressful to install them.



Avoid buying anything at the airport or on the flight. \$5 earbuds? \$3 bag of chips? Not if we can help it. Pack your earphones and plenty of snacks for the munchkins. Bring an empty water bottle to fill up at the fountain.

Take advantage of free. Children under age two fly for free so pick up your toddler and go. Also, hotel, resorts, restaurants and tour operators will offer free deals for kids with certain conditions (age ranges, book-by dates, two paying adults, etc.), so do an online search for promos.

Try a house swap. "My wife and I have done house swaps in New Mexico, Seattle, Salt Spring Island, and we estimate that we have saved several thousand dollars," Zussino says. He used the house swap category on Craigslist to find other families. "We vetted the other families via Skype and it was a great experience. They gave us nice insider knowledge of the area - restaurants, shopping, things to do."

Feeding a family is no easy feat on vacation. Especially if you have wee ones who are particular about their meals. Use a vacation rental with services such as Airbnb to **find accommodations with a cooking space**, suggests Chris Myden, CEO of Ydeals Inc.

Even better, **vacation with another family** and rent a larger home through Airbnb, VRBO or homeaway.com. It'll be half the cost of groceries, etc., and twice the fun. Bonus: the kids can entertain each other.

Look into your existing benefits. "My work benefits give me access to government employee hotel rates," Zussino says. "Through my employer's health insurance I have access to Perkopolis (an employee discount program). Perkopolis has a hotel search that even beats Expedia." Also, check if your alumni or trade association can get you hooked up with discount hotel rates at preferred chains.

Sign your little travellers up for their own frequent flyer accounts. If they're old enough to sit in a paid seat, they can be earning precious airline miles or points.

Make use of credit card rewards. If you're looking for a credit card with travel benefits, Zussino suggests signing up for cards with no annual fees; many offer travel insurance and car rental benefits as well as sign-up bonuses of free points. The PC World Elite Mastercard, for example, offers travel emergency medical insurance for trips up to 10 days for those under age 65 and free car rental collision/loss damage waiver insurance.



Before you run out to book attractions or tours, **do an online search for deals.** "It's possible to save quite a bit just by simply Googling the name of the attraction or tour and the words: 'discount' or 'coupon,'" Myden says. "On a recent trip to New Zealand it was rare not to find a minimum discount of at least 25 per cent off the 'official price' just by booking through sites like BookMe.nz, the New Zealand equivalent of Groupon."

If at all possible, be flexible. KAYAK found that if you're going from a Canadian city to, say, Punta Cana, you'll save 20 per cent by travelling in September instead of July. You'll save big bucks on

airfare and accommodations by travelling in low season - or in the weeks in between the low and high seasons (shoulder season is typically April to May and September to October). So consider a quality four-day vacation rather than a full week in high season.

Even flying a day or two before or after the most sought after dates can make a big difference; Myden says he uses Google Flights or KAYAK to **search flex dates**. KAYAK also has a feature called price forecast that will use historical data to predict whether airfare will decrease or increase in the next week.

"Keep in mind that the off-season doesn't necessarily mean anytime but the summer," says Barry Choi, a budget travel expert who blogs at moneywehave.com². "Arizona and certain parts of Florida can be cheaper during the summer months."



Choose a destination that will give you more bang for your buck. Think of taking the kids on an adventurous, and perhaps more distant, jaunt: countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, Bolivia or Hungary offer great value, Choi says. "It may cost you a bit more for airfare to get there, but once you're on the ground, you can live comfortably on a modest budget," he says. "In Koh Samui, Thailand, I was able to rent a bungalow that comfortably slept three for \$40 a night. Meals in the country were, on average, \$2 to \$4 a person."

Sign up for online alerts to crazy cheap travel deals. For example, Myden says families recently took advantage of a great flight deal to Japan (\$597 round-trip after taxes from Toronto) listed on his site.

Or, stay closer to home. With the higher U.S. dollar, a great option would be to explore our home and native land. You can rent a two-bedroom home in Ottawa for \$781 per week or in Calgary for \$900, according to TripAdvisor Vacation Rentals.

If you have to schlep the kiddos off the plane for a connecting flight, make the best of it. **Visit two cities for the price of one** and take advantage of airlines that offer free stopovers in their hub city, such as KLM, Air France and Icelandair, says Rishi Modi who operates NextDeparture.ca.

Illustration by Mike Faille

References

1. canadiantravelhacking.boardingarea.com
2. www.moneywehave.com

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