

Tips for a great vacation that won't break the bank

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Plan ahead. The earlier you start planning a trip, the more money you'll likely save. Look for discounts on flights, tickets, hotels and more. Research inexpensive or free activities at your destination.

Count all the costs. Hidden or hard-to-determine costs, fees, and taxes come with hotel stays and plane tickets, and don't forget to budget for incidentals like food, gas money and sunscreen.

Think close, or mini. Consider staying close to home. Or visit Aunt Millie for an opportunity to see a new place. (You can return the favor later.) And day or weekend trips don't drain your bank account nearly as much as a one- or two-week vacation.

Go outdoors. If your family is open to camping, skip the hotel and sleep under the stars or in a tent. Many outdoor stores will rent tents and sleeping bags. And "camping food" like hot dogs and s'mores is very affordable.

Knock a star off your hotel. Be honest: How long will your family really be in your room? Spend the money on daytime activities.

Factor in "down time." If you're hanging around your hotel pool, you won't be running around spending money.

Pay in cash. Research has shown that we spend roughly 15 percent more when we pay with a credit card as opposed to using cash. If you have to count out bills to pay for a meal or memento, you might decide it isn't worth the money.

Look for cheap eats. If you're driving, pack a cooler with sandwiches so that you don't have to stop at restaurants as often. Once there, pick up ingredients for quick, easy meals. And for meals out, ask your hotel about coupons and early-bird specials.

Start saving for next year. Put a set amount into a vacation fund each week or month and make extra contributions from tax refunds, bonuses, raises or garage sales. Involve the kids by having them chip in some allowance. Create a paper chain and add a link each time the fund grows by \$20, building the anticipation and teaching the concept of saving over time for a goal.

Cygan is the author of *The Joy of Financial Security: The art and science of becoming happier, managing your money wisely, and creating a secure financial future*

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