

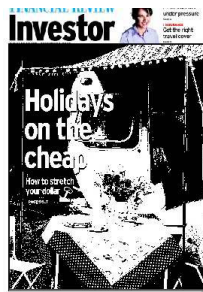
# Holidays on the cheap

How to stretch  
your dollar

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## Seasides, cheaper rides and more besides

Going on vacation can be costly, crowded and frustrating. **Bina Brown** looks at ways to stretch the dollar without stretching patience.



It is that time of the year when it seems like the whole country is on the move, either travelling to see family or taking that long-awaited summer vacation.

Long queues at the airport, packed holiday spots and increased traffic should be taken for granted for the next few weeks at least.

While tough economic times might cause people to rethink their holidays, it doesn't have to mean cancelling one altogether.

There are plenty of ways to save money and get some rest away from the house – even if away from the house means pitching the tent in the backyard.

With petrol prices at their lowest level in four years, more people are likely to take to the roads rather than fly – but even the airlines are offering holiday bargains. Likewise, holiday operators not yet fully booked are offering discounts for the last-minute traveller.

#### ■ A CLICK AWAY

Most travellers are aware of the savings that can be made by booking airline tickets online. Booking a Qantas flight online, instead of by phone, can save almost \$30. Other airlines offer similar discounts for booking online.

While there are cheap fares on offer, the costs can quickly add up if there are any changes to a booking. For a Qantas booking, depending on the fare class and how late the changes are, there could be another fee of about \$44 as well as a \$10 service charge.

Using frequent flyer points to book flights or accommodation will save opening the wallet at all, at least for part of the holiday.

The joint chief executive of marketing at online accommodation website TakeABreak.com.au, Penny Young, says booking online for accommodation can often be cheaper – but make sure there is no booking fee added after the process, particularly where websites put the intending traveller in direct contact with the operators to negotiate a price.

She says TakeABreak has a “best deal guarantee” that ensures any of the operators offering this are providing the best deal available at any time, either on the internet or elsewhere.

#### ■ LAST MINUTE

Spur-of-the-moment holidays can be a great way to recharge the batteries and keep the bank balance reasonably steady.

Websites including wotif.com, lastminute.com.au and laterate.com are becoming increasingly well known among people looking for last-minute, cheap accommodation deals on offer by hotels and other holiday accommodation options such as bed and breakfasts and privately owned apartments.

The rates vary depending on a hotel's booking schedule for different dates and may differ considerably from the actual “rack rate”.

Newcomer Ubid4rooms.com has taken the online booking concept further by asking consumers to tell hotels what they are prepared to pay for accommodation.

There are about 400 hotels and other properties in more than 40 cities and towns that list their preferred rates on the Ubid4rooms.com website up to two weeks in advance.

Consumers make their own offers for rooms, with confirmation given within three hours.

A hotel can also offer a price it is willing to accept.

The website's founder, hotel industry veteran Gary Berman, says the economic crisis means hotels and other “perishable” tourism products are considering new distribution methods and selling tools.

Berman says consumers have become very aggressive bargain-hunters, so to put more “bums in beds”, hotels need to be more flexible on rates.

“It is better to control a discount than leave a room empty, especially in times like these,” he says.

#### ■ AIR OR ROAD

With petrol prices falling, filling up the car and heading off is not the budget buster it was six months ago.

Some people consider the drive part of the holiday.

Whether driving is worth it over flying may depend on who is travelling in the car and the destination.

A visitor to the TakeABreak website asked her teenage son what was the worst thing about travelling.

He didn't mention the long-haul flights to Britain or the US; his idea of hell was nine hours in a car on the way to Byron Bay and that was with the distractions of an iPod, a Nintendo DS and DVD player in the car.

The website's tip there is to “book early and take advantage of the cheaper domestic flights now available and hopefully the whole family will arrive as friends and not sworn enemies”.

Flying to a destination may well be cheaper and faster but think about how you are going to get around once you get there. Hiring a car will add to the costs.

#### ■ AVOID THE PEAK

The last week in December and early January is a notoriously difficult and expensive period to book many places on the coast. Easter is another peak period, as is the September school holidays.

Outside of those times – the low season – it is generally considerably cheaper, with a few exceptions.

Young says long weekends are popular

among couples while winter is obviously the peak season for accommodation in or near the snowfields.

“If possible, travel just outside school holidays – if you have kids – and in the low season if you don't. You will save significantly on accommodation costs.”

At this time of the year, some of the best deals might be found in the Northern Territory and northern Queensland – which might be hot but are pretty exciting in the wet. Also, try inland towns and regions.

Young says most inland visitors self-drive, which offers great value.

“Regional destinations are the most popular on our site, rather than city locations, Young says. “The Great Ocean Road in Victoria and the Bays and Peninsulas are our biggest destinations.”

While there are still places available for Christmas, the best places are going fast.

#### ■ SELF-CONTAINED

Renting holiday houses is generally a cheaper option than many apartments and definitely most hotels – unless you strike a good deal through a last-minute site.

If you can book something privately it might be even cheaper still.

The great cost-saving advantage of a self-contained holiday is you won't have the expense of eating out for every meal.

If you have anyone with special dietary requirements or a fussy eater, it's much easier to deal with in your “own” kitchen. The downside is someone has to do the shopping, cooking and cleaning up.

Another advantage of self-contained accommodation is there will usually be a living area as well as two or more bedrooms, so depending on the number of people holidaying, people can retreat to their own spaces.

Added value from self-contained accommodation can come in the form of free entertainment such as the beach, bushwalking or a pool.

At night, it might be a good time to revisit some of the old favourites, which can often be found in the cupboards, like Monopoly or cards.

#### ■ ENTERTAINMENT

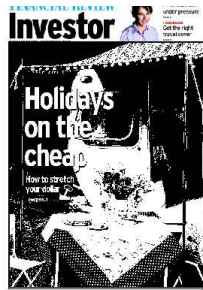
The costs of visiting museums, national parks and local attractions can add up quickly but they are nothing compared to the “big ticket” holiday lures.

The Gold Coast theme parks – Movie World, Sea World, Wet'n'Wild Water World and Dreamworld – or Sydney icons such as Taronga Zoo, Sydney Aquarium and Sydney Wildlife World are favourites that don't come cheap.

Fortunately, there are deals and family discounts that bring the costs down.

Sydney Aquarium offers discounts for buying tickets online as well as a further discount for a “combo pass”, which includes Sydney Wildlife World, next door.

The Super, Fun and Escape passes offer



discounts and entry deals to Movie World, Sea World and Wet'n'Wild.

These can be bought directly from the parks or through separate associations such as motoring groups.

Family passes represent significant savings on single tickets to most attractions.

Buying anything in bulk is generally cheaper, including movie tickets to any major and most local cinemas, which might be a great saver in wet weather.

**■ HOME HOLIDAY**

A holiday doesn't have to mean driving or flying anywhere.

The Australian Scholarships Group has compiled an online guide (at [asg.com.au](http://asg.com.au)) of activities for parents, grandparents or

anybody who is keeping children entertained during the school holidays.

Ideally, the holidays are a great time to just be together and enjoy activities that won't break the budget.

"Of course it's fun to go to the movies or have a day out at a theme park or concert – but who can afford to do that every day?" says ASG manager Michelle Hunder.

"Many of the activities will remind parents of the games they used to play as children, while others will be completely new. Some suggestions will involve using a computer or being in the kitchen, while others simply require imagination."

Among the stay-home ideas are:

- write and perform a play – the children

- can write the script together, then be assigned different roles such as actor, director, stage design and costume maker;
- make a special pizza and let the kids choose all the toppings;
- decorate anything and everything, such as tie-dying a shirt or tablecloth;
- learn some magic tricks and put on a show for the family;
- pitch a tent in the backyard;
- host a competition to build paper planes and fly them;
- plant a flower bed or vegetable patch;
- explore the neighbourhood or use public transport to explore a new area.

**> CASE STUDY**

**BROKEN HILL** in the middle of summer might not be everyone's idea of a great holiday but for the Woodcroft-Bacetic family it is all part of a bigger adventure.

The Sydney-based family of four – Ashley Woodcroft, Claudia Bacetic and daughters Mercedes, 8, and Miranda, 5 – are going on a road trip to Kangaroo Island in South Australia.

"We love travelling overseas but with interest rates high for most of the year we wanted to look at something economical. We thought we'd do an outback Australian holiday," says Claudia.

They did look at flying to Kangaroo Island but air fares for four quickly added up.

"We love the outback and we don't mind driving and we get to spend some quality time as a family," she says. The big issue is whether the 18-year-old family car will make it.

The 10 days on Kangaroo Island will be spent with other friends in a lighthouse keeper's cottage. An added bonus for Claudia was that the rates didn't spike just because it was the Christmas holiday period.

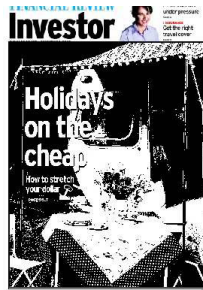


"It is self catering and there is no TV so it is going to be just great."

The trip back will be via Mildura and the Murray River.

Claudia doesn't expect trouble finding accommodation in regional Australia in mid January.

And she is confident that online specialists TakeABreak will find them some suitable "on route" accommodation – preferably with a pool and airconditioning.



**> CASE STUDY**

COLIN WILLIAMS has always dreamt of driving around Australia. The keen traveller had a vague plan that when he retired in 2002 he and his wife Judy would go to Europe every second year and drive somewhere in their own country every other year.

As it turns out, they have been overseas every year

and the outback adventure has been all but forgotten.

That was until the economy began to bite and the semi-retired Canberra couple decided to spend 2009 at home. Well, almost.

"I'm using the economy as an excuse to go for a drive," says Colin.

"I like driving and while I

have always dreamt of driving around Australia it has never come to fruition. The plan is to visit my daughter in Mackay, Queensland, then head to Mount Isa and Alice Springs and see how far we go from there."

That is, after the couple take a relatively quick trip to

India in April.

In the shorter term, Colin and Judy are driving to Port Macquarie to spend Christmas near relatives.

They've booked an apartment because it was cheaper than a hotel, plus it had the advantage of a second room if family decided to join them.

Keen travellers ... Colin and Judy Williams.



**> TIPS FOR BUDGET HOLIDAYS**

- Self-contained means self catering – always a cheaper option than eating out.
- Look for added value such as pools, mini golf and bush walks.
- Travel in the low season or just outside school holidays.
- Use reward or frequent flyer points to pay for transport and that way you only have to pay for accommodation.
- Singles-couples: booking accommodation that can take more than one couple significantly decreases the cost per couple.
- Pet-friendly properties will save on boarding costs for animals.
- Booking online for flights and accommodation can often be a cheaper option.
- Check for deals through memberships – for example, NRMA, RACV or playgroup associations.