

## Frugal Traveler

Seeing the World on a Budget



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# A Guide to the Caribbean on a Budget

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If you have your low-budget heart set on high-end islands like St. Bart's or St. Martin or Turks and Caicos this winter, with enough research and flexibility you may be able to pull it off. But the real way to keep costs down is to head to the lower-cost islands that actively compete for travelers with light wallets.

The first rule is that the lower your budget, the greater the proportion that will be devoted to airfare. That's why the **Bahamas** is a good place to start looking this winter, when the islands' Ministry of Tourism offers airfare promotions. Under the [Free Companion Airfare and Instant Air Credit](#), travelers who book a four-night stay at certain hotels (some under \$150 a night) will get either a companion ticket free or a \$300 "instant air credit." Travel must be booked by Dec. 1. Even if you don't stay in a hotel covered by the deal, the Bahamas is one of the cheaper destinations to fly this winter, at least from New York. On the other hand, the relative lack of all-inclusive resorts means that it's trickier to keep costs down for meals and other activities once you're there.

In general, though, the bigger islands have better deals. Travel writers and travel agents agree: the Dominican Republic and Jamaica — where the labor supply is large, competition is fierce and tourism officials are zealous — are probably the best overall deals in the Caribbean, offering both the best bargains for all-inclusive resorts and plenty of choices for independent budget travelers.

Travelers headed to the **Dominican Republic** over the winter, for example, could benefit, not just from competition for tourist dollars, but from the added competition created by the enormous number of Dominican-Americans headed home for vacation.

Those looking for resorts will find deals, like 20 percent off stays at the six [Barceló Hotels and Resorts](#) located in the Dominican Republic from Dec. 24 to April 30, 2011, as long as booking is completed by Dec. 15. (Some are all-inclusive, some not.) For the all-inclusive Barceló Dominican Beach in Puerto Plata, prices start as low as \$93.80 a night for a double-occupancy room — before the discount.

But anyone wanting to dive into friendly, energetic Dominican culture should avoid Punta Cana, essentially a resort ghetto on the distant east coast. Good deals are also available outside the all-inclusive world. Hotel La Catalina, near Puerto Plata and the beaches of the north coast, is offering rooms as low as \$76 per night; the [Coco Boutique Hotel](#), in Santo Domingo's Colonial Zone (not a beach area, mind you) has double rooms for \$75 — even over Christmas. If you end up in Puerto Plata, try to visit a traditional Dominican nightclub like [Rancho Típico Puerto Plata](#), priced for the local crowd; if you're in Santo Domingo, catch the free concert starting late every Sunday afternoon at the San Francisco Monastery Ruins.

**Jamaica**, whose resorts are concentrated in Negril, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, is the Dominican Republic's obvious competition. Linda Bourgeois, a travel agent who runs a Travel Leaders franchise in Memphis, calls Jamaica "the best value for the money," and judging from the \$350 airfares that I found on the Internet for flights from New York to Montego Bay in January, she's right. She said the long, quiet beachfront of Negril is ideal for couples, and resorts near Montego Bay are good for families and for anyone heading down just for the weekend (because of its proximity to the airport). She suggests the resorts concentrated around Ocho Rios for water-sports lovers.

I recently traveled to [Barbados](#), and with airfares similar to those to the Dominican Republic, easy-to-find bargain accommodations and an excellent, easy-to-use bus system, the island is a good choice for those who want to get to know a local culture and not just sit on the beach (though you can do that, too).

Hotels under \$100 a night are rampant along this island's bustling, night-life- and restaurant-rich south coast, and many deals can be found at [intimatehotelsbarbados.com](#); "intimate," it turns out, is a euphemism for "low-budget."

For travelers looking for a smaller island experience but still trying to keep costs down, the Dutch islands of **Aruba, Bonaire and Saba** are interesting choices. "Aruba doesn't have luxury properties," said Terry McCabe, a travel agent with Altour International. "And it's got gambling, which supports the room rates." Of course, this only saves you money if you are not a gambler (or if you are a very lucky one).

The extraordinarily knowledgeable Ryan Ver Berkmoes, coordinating editor of the [Lonely Planet's Caribbean](#) guide, suggests that scuba fanatics try to make their budget work in Bonaire. It "may be the best place for divers anywhere," he wrote in a wistful e-mail from Munich, where temperatures were in the 40s. In Bonaire, divers and snorkelers do not have to pay the expense of chartering a boat to reach many of the best sites — ideal locations for shore dives are marked along the island's coast. He also raved about Bonaire's pink-hued sand beaches, and recommended [The Lodge](#), a B&B with Balinese teak furniture and statues, in the middle of Kralendijk, the island's main town. For stays of at least two nights, a double room costs \$80.50, including tourist tax but not breakfast (even though the place calls itself a bed-and-breakfast). The downside for Bonaire, however, is that

airfare is pricey this winter (a recent online search found round-trip fares from New York, with multiple stops, starting at about \$600 for mid-December flights).

As long as white sand is not a priority, a final possible wild card is Saba, a five-square-mile, nearly beachless islet of 2,000 residents, known for its snorkeling and rain forest. Visitors must fly into St. Maarten and then take a \$90 round-trip ferry (or \$136 flight) to the island. It may be a hassle to get to, but it just won Travel & Leisure's Top Island in the Caribbean award — for the second time. For lodging, check out the [Cottage Club](#), which offers cottages for up to four people for \$120. Other hotels, some under \$100 a night, are listed at [www.sabatourism.com](http://www.sabatourism.com).

Wherever you decide to go, there are some tips that should shave a bit off the cost of any trip. "Take all the packaged items you could possibly need, as the price of something like a box of crackers or a bag of diapers is incredibly high on islands that import everything," said Sarah Waxler, of Travel Leaders in Durham, N.C. And she offered another neat tip: some resort chains offer discounts for active or retired military; others do the same for any returning customer. She said she recently got a discount for one couple, even though the man's first visit had been with a previous wife.

And here's a lesson I learned on my recent trip to Barbados: guesthouses are a great, cheap alternative to hotels. But counterintuitively, they are most easily located on Web sites specializing in hostels, like [hostelworld.com](http://hostelworld.com) and [hostelbookers.com](http://hostelbookers.com). The sites more or less conflate hostels with guesthouses; if you're not the hostel type, just be sure you choose spots with private rooms and (if you wish) private (or "en suite") bathrooms.

There's also a lot of money to be saved by eating local, which often means simply heading away from the beach. Any place without tourists is a good sign, but a handful of tourists among locals is an even better sign. If you're willing to seek advice, take a quick look at [caribbeanchoice.com/recipes](http://caribbeanchoice.com/recipes) (which has a drop-down list by country), and ask islanders for the best spot to try specific dishes. So, if you're in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, for example, you might ask where to get the best, cheapest callaloo soup.

I've never been to St. Vincent, so I'm not sure what the answer is. But I do know what it won't be: "At the fancy restaurant on the resort by the beach."

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