How to travel anywhere on $20 a day.

By Ryan Estrada

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I've been traveling the world for nine years. Usually while dead broke, and I've gotten pretty good at it. If you know how, you can travel anywhere on 20 bucks a day.

Sure, some places that means slumming it. But in many parts of the world, you can live like a king. Let me tell you how I do it.
DON'T BOOK. ANYTHING. STOP. DON'T DO IT.

WHATEVER 'DEAL' YOU FIND, I GUARANTEE THERE IS A MUCH NICER FAMILY-RUN PLACE TO STAY NEARBY FOR A TINY FRACTION OF THE PRICE. NO, THE WHOLE CITY ISN'T GOING TO BE BOOKED SOLID UNLESS THERE'S SOME MAJOR INTERNATIONAL EVENT. STOP WORRYING.

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU PAY FOR WHEN YOU BOOK A PRICIER HOTEL FROM HOME? THE ADVERTISING DOLLARS THEY SPENT FOR YOU TO HAVE HEARD OF THEM FROM HOME.

IN INDIA, I HAD THIS RICH FAMILY WALK BY AS I WAS LYING IN A HAMMOCK IN MY BEACH FRONT CABIN. "OH WOW," THEY SAID "THIS PLACE MUST HAVE BEEN REALLY EXPENSIVE. WE PAID $250 AND WE'RE LIKE THREE BLOCKS FROM THE BEACH." "IT WAS FOUR DOLLARS" I RESPONDED.
PACKING

PACK LIGHT. NO, LIGHTER THAN THAT. COME ON. WHEN I MOVE TO A NEW COUNTRY FOR A YEAR, I DO IT WITH CARRY ON. YOU CAN PACK LIGHTER THAN THAT FOR A WEEK.

THE BIGGEST COST IN TRAVELING ISN'T STUFF, IT'S THE SENTENCE "EH, I DON'T WANT TO CARRY ALL MY STUFF". IT'S WHAT KEEPS YOU IN EXPENSIVE HOTELS, GETS YOU RIDING IN OVERPRICED TAXIS. IF YOUR STUFF DOESN'T FIT IN A BACKPACK THAT'S LIGHT ENOUGH YOU CAN FORGET YOU'RE CARRYING IT, YOU HAVE TOO MUCH STUFF.

I KNOW YOU THINK IT'LL SAVE YOU MONEY TO HAVE STUFF YOU MIGHT NEED. YES, IF THE HOTEL DOESN'T HAVE SHAMPOO YOU MIGHT HAVE TO SPEND A DOLLAR ON A NEW ONE. BUT SETTLING FOR SOMETHING OVERPRICED BECAUSE OF ALL THE STUFF YOU HAVE TO CARRY WHILE YOU LOOK FOR SOMETHING CHEAPER CAN COST YOU HUNDREDS.
GETTING THERE

Airfare is the one part of travel that will always be expensive and that will always have to be planned in advance. But you can find ways to make it cheaper. Planning my trip from Panama to Michigan for Christmas, all the booking sites said at least $400. I googled “low cost airlines from PTY” and found a flight for $166.

And you don’t always have to fly! When I was planning my trip from Panama to South America, all of the airlines said nearly $700. The boat cruises were $600. Then I found a small village with no cars where there’s a guy with a canoe that will take me for 20 bucks.
CHOOSE THE CHEAPEST

IF YOU WANNA TRAVEL CHEAP, DON'T EVEN LOOK AT THE PART OF THE BOOKING SITE THAT TELLS YOU HOW MANY LAYOVERS THERE ARE. IF YOU WERE GOING TO A MOVIE AND THE USHER OFFERED YOU $200 TO WAIT IN THE LOBBY FOR THE NEXT SHOWING, WOULD YOU DO IT? OF COURSE YOU WOULD! SO WHY DO PEOPLE PAY SO MUCH EXTRA TO AVOID SPENDING AN HOUR IN AN AIRPORT? THAT'S PAID EXPLORING TIME!

HERE'S A TIP. JUST ONCE, TAKE THE WORST FORM OF TRAVEL YOU CAN FIND. FOR ME, IT WAS THIRD CLASS TRAINS IN INDIA. IMAGINE 24 HOURS PACKED IN LIKE HUMAN TETRIS PIECES. PEOPLE UNDER SEATS, ON LUGGAGE RACKS, HANGING OUT THE DOOR, SITTING ON THE ROOF, STRANGERS ON YOUR LAP, AND IF YOU GET UP TO GO TO THE BATHROOM, YOU loose YOUR SEAT FOR THE REST OF THE TRIP.

YOU KNOW HOW MUCH MONEY I SAVED DOING THAT? ABOUT 3 DOLLARS. BUT YOU KNOW HOW MUCH GRIEF I SAVED MYSELF FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE, WHEN SUDDENLY A 24 HOUR FLIGHT WITH 3 LAYOVERS SEEMED LIKE HEAVEN?
GET AROUND
LEAVING THE AIRPORT

EVERY 10 STEPS YOU TAKE IN AN AIRPORT DROPS THE COST OF TRANSPORTATION IN HALF.

IF YOU BOOK A SHUTTLE IN ADVANCE, YOU'LL PAY 80 BUCKS. 10 STEPS TO THE BOOKING COUNTER IN THE AIRPORT, 40. 10 MORE STEPS TO THE CURB? 20. 10 MORE STEPS TO THE BORED DRIVERS WHO DIDN'T GET A GOOD SPOT? 10. KEEP WALKING, THERE JUST MIGHT BE A FREE SHUTTLE TO THE BUS STATION WHERE YOU CAN GET A BUS FOR 50 CENTS.

HECK, TAKE A FREE SHUTTLE TO ONE OF THE HOTELS YOU WERE THINKING ABOUT BOOKING BEFORE, THEN WALK ACROSS THE STREET AND STAY SOMEWHERE CHEAPER.
FOREIGNER FACE

Many people spend a lot of money on taxis because they’re afraid of trying to figure out the local bus schedule or ask directions.

That’s when the foreigner face comes in. Whenever you are lost, or otherwise need help, and don’t speak the language, just make the foreigner face. Arch your eyebrows, let your mouth hang open and turn your head aimlessly as though searching for something you will never find.

It’s a blend of confusion, stupidity and exasperation. You will look so pathetic that anyone in the vicinity who speaks your language will run over to help.
I try not to pay more than $10 for a place to sleep. I'll pay 15, but I feel all fancy. That doesn't work in places like the US or Europe, but I'll get into how to make the budget there later.

Just walk into hotels and ask. The first price they give you will be their highest. Ask how much for a fan room. Then a shared bathroom. Every question you ask, the price will get lower. That's the price to beat. Go to a new hotel and try to get cheaper.

Traveling in Tanzania with my sister, we were told adamantly by the first hotel we asked that they had the cheapest rate in town, $70, and they were almost sold out, so we'd better book fast. "I can find one for seven," I responded.

I found one a block away for six. And it was nicer than the first place. They just didn't have to overcharge to make up for money spent on advertising, or the real estate right next to the bus stop.
CHEAPER OPTIONS

There are places to stay other than hotels. Check hostels. They have both bunks and private rooms. Plus they're used to poor travelers, so they can help you and give you advice.

Different countries have different variations of the super cheap lodging. In Asia, they have special rooms in the saunas you can sleep in for a couple bucks. In Japan they have capsule hotels. Pro tip: if you go into the capsule hotel and say 'no capsule' you can sleep in a much more comfortable recliner for half the price. If you see a place that may or may not be a place to sleep, just walk up and use hand signals to indicate sleeping. They'll either give you a price or turn you away.
FREE OPTIONS

YES, THERE ARE SOME PLACES IN THE WORLD THAT EVEN IF YOU'RE SLUMMING IT, YOU CAN'T FIND ANYWHERE FOR LESS THAN 20 BUCKS. BUT YOU CAN BE SAFE AND STILL SLEEP FREE.

YOU CAN SLEEP AT THE AIRPORT. AT THE BUS STATION. THE TRAIN STATION. IF YOU HAVE MORE TRAVELING TO DO, TAKE THE OVERNIGHT TRIP SO YOU CAN SLEEP ON THE BUS. ONCE I SLEPT IN THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL. ANOTHER TIME I WENT TO A 24 HOUR LAUNDROMAT AND PUT MY DIRTY CLOTHES IN A TURNED-OFF DRYER JUST SO I COULD SLEEP IN THE CORNER AND PRETEND LIKE I FELL ASLEEP WHILE WAITING FOR MY CLOTHES TO FINISH.
CHECK OUT

YOU KNOW WHEN I FIND A HOTEL? WHEN I'M READY TO SLEEP.

THAT WAY, I CAN EXPLORE WHEREVER I WANT AND NOT HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT TAKING A BUS OR A TAXI ALL THE WAY BACK TO ANOTHER PART OF THE CITY JUST BECAUSE I ALREADY PAID TO SLEEP THERE.

WHEN I'M READY TO CRASH, I FIND A CHEAP PLACE RIGHT WHERE I AM, SLEEP, AND CHECK OUT AGAIN IN THE MORNING.

IF YOU PACKED LIGHT ENOUGH, FINDING A PLACE TO SLEEP DOESN'T HAVE TO BE YOUR TOP PRIORITY.
ENTERTAINMENT

WALK EVERYWHERE

WHEREVER YOU'RE GOING, WALK THERE. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY TO REALLY EXPERIENCE THE PLACE YOU'RE VISITING. NOT BY POPPING OUT OF TAXIS JUST TO LOOK AT THE THINGS LONELY PLANET TOLD YOU TO LOOK AT. YOU WILL PROBABLY STUMBLE ACROSS SOMETHING SO AWESOME YOU'LL FORGET ALL ABOUT THAT BORING THING YOU WERE TRYING TO SEE.

AND IF YOU DISCOVER SOMETHING YOURSELF, IT IS 100 TIMES MORE AMAZING THAN IF YOU WENT THERE BECAUSE A BOOK TOLD YOU TO.

FREE ENTERTAINMENT,
FREE TRANSPORTATION.

HERE ARE SOME DIRECTIONS FOR YOU. TURN LEFT OUT OF YOUR HOTEL. WALK FOR 3 BLOCKS, THEN TURN RIGHT. WALK FOUR BLOCKS, THEN TURN LEFT AND WALK UNTIL YOU SEE A BUS STOP. GET ON THE FIRST BUS THAT COMES. GET OFF AFTER 10 STOPS, WALK TO THE NEXT CORNER, TURN RIGHT. WHERE WILL THAT TAKE YOU? I DON'T KNOW, BUT SOON YOU WILL.
LISTEN FOR MUSIC

When you're wandering around and you hear music, follow it. This has lead me to all kinds of free entertainment. I've ended up hanging out backstage with a Japanese No Doubt cover band, in the front row at a crazy dog show, at an international music festival, a Mexican goth renaissance parade and many other adventures.

IF IT'S FREE, DO IT!

You see a gathering of people. Or a flyer. Maybe it's not your thing. You're on vacation! Do something you wouldn't normally do! Everywhere you go is filled with fairs, art gallery openings, free concerts, film screenings and who knows what else! Even if the subject is not to your liking, the cool people you meet may be!

Good deeds are also free! Stop and give blood. Answer that ad looking for volunteers.

USE YOUR TALENTS!

Using your talents is the best way to make new friends that are interested in the same things as you.

Play an instrument? Pick one up and start tinkering in the hostel lobby. Soon a crowd will form, and you'll be putting on a concert. Like to draw? Sketch the people you see playing music, and it suddenly turns into an all out artist party! Write in the park, and surely someone will ask you what you're writing about.
STREET FOOD

Some places you travel, the street food is the best tasting meal you can have. Almost every place you travel, it’s the cheapest.

In a touristy Bangkok restaurant, a plate of Pad Thai can cost you a small fortune. On the curb right outside is a super nice lady offering much larger, much more delicious servings for less than a dollar, and all down the road are other vendors offering delicious cheap things you can’t even get in those fancy restaurants.

HOSTEL COOKING

If you stay in a hostel, there will be a kitchen you can use. Go to the local farmer’s market and load up on fresh local produce at next-to-nothing prices. There’ll be stalls that sell fresh-caught fish, rice, noodles..... take that back and you can make a gourmet meal that you can share with a group of hungry strangers and finish the meal with some new friends.
THINGS TO AVOID

DON'T USE AGENCIES

Everywhere you go there are little storefronts that offer trips to the local hotspots. There are some great hot springs in Boquete, Panama. And there are dozens of travel agencies that will take you to them for $70. Or, you could take the $1 bus there, and pay the $2 entry fee yourself. If you see an advertisement for somewhere you want to go, don't walk in the agency. Jot down the name and ask somebody else how to get there.

DON'T DO BUSINESS WITH PUSHY PEOPLE

If someone is harassing you to get in their taxi, to stay in their hotel, eat at their restaurant, or pay them for anything else, walk away. Chances are, if they were offering a good service for a good price they wouldn't need to bully customers into taking them up on it. And when you're being pressured, it's difficult to make a good decision. Keep walking, and find someone else.

DON'T SPEND TOO MUCH IN THE BAR

Whenever travelers spend more than they expected and can't figure out where, this is where. Watch what you spend!

DON'T WORRY ABOUT LOOKING LIKE AN IDIOT

You're a tourist. You look like an idiot anyway. Get over it.
IT WILL TAKE A WHILE BEFORE YOU'RE WELL-TRAVELED ENOUGH THAT YOU CAN MAKE IT DOWN TO JUST TWENTY BUCKS A DAY, BUT FOLLOW WHATEVER TIPS YOU CAN TO GET YOU DOWN TO YOUR PREFERRED BUDGET.

JUST REMEMBER TO STAY SAFE, YOU DON'T HAVE TO TRAVEL AS RIDICULOUSLY UNPREPARED AS I DO TO GO AROUND THE WORLD WITHOUT GOING INTO DEBT.

FEEL FREE TO EMAIL ME IF YOU NEED ANY ADVICE. IF THERE'S A DUMB MISTAKE YOU CAN MAKE, I'VE PROBABLY MADE IT.

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HAPPY TRAVELS, EVERYONE.