

How to Plan a Trip...

Clark's Best Travel Tips to Save Money

Most of us have to book travel at some point or another, whether it's for work, to visit family and friends, or just to get away from it all on vacation.

Money expert Clark Howard — a former travel agent himself — has spent decades perfecting the art of planning and booking trips. In this article, we'll share his secrets and show you how to use all of the available tools to book travel plans that suit your needs at the lowest possible price.

How to Plan a Trip

The very first thing you need to do is plan your trip. Planning a trip can usually be as simple or as involved as you want it to be. Some people love to fly by the seat of their pants and do minimal planning, while others like to have every minute of their itinerary accounted for before they leave the house.

No matter which type of traveler you are, there are some basics that you're going to need to take care of in any circumstance if you want to travel on a budget:

- **Select your destination or destinations:** In some cases — like when you have to travel for work, for a wedding or to visit family for the holidays — your destination will be selected for you and there's no decision to make. Other times, you might have some days off from work and decide you want to scratch a place off your bucket list, so you might select from one of the places you've always wanted to go. Or, if you're like Clark, you might just wait for a deal to come along and let the destination pick you (more on that in a bit)!
- **Figure out how long you want to go for:** If you only have a certain number of days off, this might already be decided for you. But if you have some flexibility in your schedule, being fluid with the number of days in your trip could be the key to saving money on travel expenses. You should also consider your destination when determining your travel dates. For example, you might be able to do everything you want to do in a smaller city in a day or two, but taking in everything important to you in New York City might take a week or more.
- **Research your destination:** If you're going somewhere you've never been, you'll want to get the lay of the land. Figuring out what you want to accomplish on your trip can help you decide exactly where you want to stay and how you intend to get around. The research process can also help you understand how much various things like lodging, transportation, attractions and meals are going to cost so you can make sure you stay within your budget.

How to Book Flights



How to Find the Best Flight Deal

1. Choose your travel date(s) & destination
2. Toggle the "Track Prices" button
3. Receive price drop alerts for your route

- Book at least 3 weeks in advance
- DON'T book on Thursdays and Fridays when fares tend to be more expensive
- Be flexible with your departure date

Once you've got the trip planning part down, it's time to figure out how you're going to get to where you're going. If your destination is not within easy driving distance or you simply don't want to deal with it, an airline flight is probably going to be the best option.

Booking flights has come a long way since the days when it was necessary to call a travel agent or the airline itself to buy tickets. Now, there are literally thousands of places to turn to book a flight. So how do you find the best price?

First of all, know that *when* you book your ticket can be just as important as *how* and *where* you book it. A recent survey found that the cheapest fares for both economy and premium cabin seating can generally be found on Sundays. The same survey says that:

- The most expensive tickets tend to be booked on **Thursdays and Fridays**.
- **It pays to book your flight early**. For most air travel, booking at least three weeks in advance often results in cheaper fares.
- **Be flexible with your departure date**. According to global trends, **Thursday and Friday are the cheapest departure days** for most air travel. This can save travelers around 10% on airfares.

When it comes to finding cheap airfares, there are a number of options but it's important to have a strategy. Flexibility is the key to landing a great deal. When you have firm travel plans, start gathering airline quotes several weeks in advance, but resist making a purchase until you know the fare patterns to your destination or until a too-hard-to-pass-up deal comes along.

We've found that the most robust flight search engine is Google Flights.

“Google Flights should be the first website to visit to search domestic and international airfares before you jump over to a specific airline to book a flight,” Team Clark travel expert Clara Bosonetto says. “With its many filters, it's the best site to use when you must fly on a specific airline, must have a nonstop flight, you have a multiple city trip (flying into one city and out of another) or you want to book one-way travel.”

When you search your itinerary, Google Flights will show you options for your selected dates, let you know if the prices are higher, lower or about average for your route, and let you explore fares on alternate dates with its calendar and price graph features.

Once you've selected a flight, the site will show you the total cost of your ticket and what's included — or not included — for that fare. You'll also see options for upgraded tickets (if available) and what paying more will get you. If checked bags are not included in your fare, the site will let you know what that will cost you, as well.

When you're ready to book, Google Flights will send you directly to the airline's website to complete your transaction.

The site will also allow you to “Track Prices” to potentially save big on airfare. When you toggle that button (you must be signed into your Google account), Google will send you alerts if the price on your selected route drops.

How to Find a Hotel or Other Lodging



When it comes to planning where you stay during your trip, there are a lot of options. The increasing popularity of Airbnb and other private accommodation booking services means more choices for travelers.

Still, most people prefer to stay in a hotel when they travel and if that's you, Clark has a three-step process for booking a great room on a budget:

1. Book a Refundable Room

"If I'm flying somewhere — you usually book your airfare pretty well in advance — I also book a hotel room at the same time," Clark says. "I book the best deal I can find for where I'm going, but always a refundable room."

Doing this leaves you the option to cancel the room you've booked if you find a better deal in the days leading up to your trip.

2. Search for Better Deals Before Your Trip

That's where the next step comes in: Really doing the research to find the best deal.

"I already know I have a room if I need it," Clark says. "But I want a deal! So what I do is heavily concentrate on Hotwire and Priceline, two sources where you don't know where you're staying until you book nonrefundable."

Clark understands that some people might be uncomfortable with not knowing the name of their hotel before they book. That's why we published [our guide to finding out which Hotwire or Priceline hotel you're getting before you book](#).

As for when you're likely to find the best deals on those sites, Clark has a strategy:

"I'll check throughout the time period leading up to my travel, but I especially concentrate one week out and less. A lot of times, the best deals are the last few days before you travel."

Clark also checks other hotel booking sources to compare prices to what he finds on Priceline and Hotwire, including:

- **Trivago**: A handy hotel comparison site for travelers
- **Hotels.com**: Offers a Price Guarantee and often offers discount codes for room bookings

- **Roomer:** A hotel site that lets you buy beds from motivated sellers who bought nonrefundable rooms

3. Cancel the Original Booking

The last thing you need to do — assuming you’ve found a better deal on Hotwire or Priceline — is to cancel your original refundable booking.

“Occasionally that room you booked when you booked your airline deal will be the best hotel deal you’ll find,” Clark says. “But if you do it my way, most of the time you’re going to save big bucks.”

If you’re looking for a more unique travel experience, [Airbnb](#) might be the way to go. This also applies if you need a larger space, prefer to have your own cooking facilities, or if you plan to stay for more than a couple nights in a destination. You’ll often get a much better deal by renting a home or condo from a private owner.

Other top resources for private (non-hotel) accommodations include:

- **Tripping:** Aggregates over 10 million listings in more than 150,000 cities
- **VRBO:** Private homes, apartments and more

How to Book a Rental Car



So, you’ve taken care of your flight and lodging plans, but you might need some way to get around on your trip. Some destinations are totally walkable. Others have great public transportation. But if you need a car, there is a strategy to book a cheap rental.

Here are Team Clark’s six steps to getting a great deal on a rental car:

1. Figure Out What Kind of Vehicle You Need

Whether you get a sedan, SUV or van, you need to make sure the vehicle you rent makes sense for you. Important questions to ask yourself include:

- How many people will be traveling?
- How much, if any, luggage will I need to stow?
- Do I need more than two doors to accommodate car seats or special needs?
- Will I need a vehicle that can handle rough terrain?
- Do I care if the vehicle is a basic model or something more luxurious?

2. Start Your Research With AutoSlash

The first part of your search for a rental car is a secret to a lot of people, but one that Team Clark has found can save you a lot of money: [a site called AutoSlash](#).

One of the great things about AutoSlash is that the site will monitor the vehicle you select and email you if the price on the rental drops between the time you book and the time you pick it up, allowing you to re-book at the lower price. [Read our full review of saving money on rental car bookings with AutoSlash here](#).

3. Check the Other Aggregator Sites

Once you've established the lowest price you can get on your desired vehicle through AutoSlash, it's time to comparison-shop the other sites that aggregate rental car rates. Some of the most popular and trustworthy are:

- [Expedia](#)
- [Hotwire](#)
- [Kayak](#)
- [Orbitz](#)
- [Priceline](#)
- [Travelocity](#)

4. See If You Can Get a Better Deal Directly from the Rental Car Company

Once you've established the best deal available between AutoSlash and the major travel booking sites, head directly to the rental agency for that deal to see if they can match or beat the price you've already found, either on the agency's website or by calling them directly.

5. Book the Best Deal

Generally, with car rentals, you're just reserving the car you want — not paying for the rental. That means you won't even have to give up a credit card number to lock in your reservation. It also means that, unlike with many airline tickets and hotel reservations, you won't be penalized if you need to cancel or change your reservation later.

6. Check Back a Week Before Your Trip to See If Prices Have Dropped

Finally, since you're not locked into your reservation with a credit card, you have one more trick up your sleeve — and it's one of Clark's favorite travel tips.

“When I book my flight weeks or months before the actual date of travel, I also book my car rental at the same time,” he says. “Then a week before my travel date, I re-shop the car rental rate. At least 90% of the time, I find that I can book a new car cheaper at the last minute, so I just let my old reservation go.”

READ MORE: [6 Steps to Getting the Best Car Rental Deal](#)

How to Book Bus or Rail Tickets

Whether you don't like flying, you want to enjoy the landscape, or it just makes more sense for you, you might decide to travel by bus or train. If that's your plan, here's how to find the best deals.

Bus Tickets



There are a number of internet resources for booking your tickets if taking a bus is part of your trip plan. Instead of calling individual companies and getting into your car to go book, skip the line and head online to the following bus travel sites.

- **Wanderu:** This transit site and app specializes in affordable bus and train fares (but also offers flights and hotels) in North America and Europe.
- **Gotobus.com:** Listing ticket prices for bus rides, bus rentals and hotels, Gotobus.com is another option for checking ticket prices. The Deals tab has some of the most affordable bus tickets around.
- **CheckMyBus:** CheckMyBus is a travel portal that claims it can save you up to 70% on average and offers the most bus routes worldwide.
- **Busbud:** Busbud is well-regarded for its comprehensive search results and mobile app. The site, which shows routes in more than 63 countries, also has user-submitted travel reviews for every route. If you search online, you may even be able to find a discount code, which could save you up to 20% on selected travel routes.

Train Tickets



When it comes to domestic train travel, Amtrak is pretty much your only interstate choice. The rail carrier covers more than 21,000 miles across 46 states.

If you want to purchase train tickets at the lowest possible price, keep these things in mind:

- **Look for discount Saver and SmartFares:** Saver Fares are usually web-only specials that require the advanced purchase of tickets. SmartFares are weekly discounts that are typically used to fill up trains. The tickets are non-refundable and subject to availability.
- **Be aware of available discounts:** Amtrak also offers 50% discounts for children, 10% to seniors, 10% to military personnel and their families and 10% to disabled adults and their companions.

- **Check out Amtrak’s Deals page:** If you want to stay abreast of the latest deals, [Amtrak’s Deals page](#) often features buy-one-get-one-free specials and special prices on select routes.
- **Sign up for the rewards program:** Join [Amtrak’s Guest Rewards program](#) and not only will you get deals sent straight to your inbox, but you can earn 2 points per dollar spent on Amtrak and get free travel when you reach 800 points or more.
- **Look for special offers at [RailServe.com](#):** Frequently check Railserve.com, which has an Amtrak coupons section. Every Tuesday, a fresh batch of discounted Amtrak trains, cities and dates is posted on [Railserve’s Facebook page](#).

For booking international rail travel, it’s hard to beat UK-based [International Rail](#). Bookings can be made for 66,000 point-to-point routes in Europe, including on Eurostar, French TGV, German ICE, InterCity, Euro City and Spanish high-speed trains. Rail bookings for other regions include Australia, New Zealand, Asia and South Africa.

How to Book a Cruise



Clark says that booking cruises isn’t how it used to be several years ago. Back then, travelers could find bargains pretty easily because the industry wasn’t doing too well. But that’s simply no longer the case.

“Now you have to do a lot more picking and choosing,” he says. Clark adds that before you can find a good cruise deal, you need to make a couple of adjustments regarding your mindset and travel plans.

“You have to adjust to today’s reality and adjust *how you book* with the flexibility of the ship you go on, and particularly *when you sail* to get the best deal,” he says.

To that end, Clark has three primary rules to follow when it comes to booking cruises:

1. Let the Calendar Save You Money

“There are certain cycles through the year when cruise lines have trouble filling all their cabins, and that’s when you steal the great deals,” he says.

So when is typically the best time to book?

“After Thanksgiving but before Christmas kicks off is a bargain time for any kind of travel — and cruises are right in the midst of that,” he says.

Comparison shopping will give you a better understanding of what prices should look like at certain times of the year.

One of Team Clark's favorite sites for last-minute cruise deals is [VacationstoGo.com](https://www.vacationstogo.com). If you want to compare prices from multiple travel agencies, [CruiseCompete.com](https://www.cruisecompete.com) is a good one, as well.

2. Don't Let Cruise Brand Loyalty Cost You More

Some people are really loyal to cruise line brands, but that can absolutely kill your budget.

Clark's advice is when planning your trip, venture away from what you know and explore other cruise liners and what they're about: "Look at things like experimenting with cruise lines you're not that familiar with."

Clark does offer this one caution though: "Never book a deal on a cruise just because it's a deal. You need to really be comfortable that that ship is going to fit your lifestyle, the things that you're interested in."

The price won't matter much if you find yourself on a cruise ship that doesn't mesh with your expectations. Do the research.

3. Read the Reviews

To that end, you should seek a balanced view of the cruise lines and particular ships you're interested in, so it's best to read some reviews.

Clark recommends a site where you can take a deep dive into cruise ship specs as well as deals and booking tips.

"I'd love for you to spend time on [CruiseCritic.com](https://www.cruisecritic.com), reading about a ship before you book on that ship," he says. "Additionally, you can look closely at the various individual cabins to make sure you don't get in a cabin that's going to be a problem because it's in a noisy area of the ship, for example."

Another really helpful tip is to ask family, friends and coworkers if they have any recommendations. They may have more experience cruising and they know your likes and dislikes best!

Travel the Clark Howard Way: Let the Destination Pick You

Over the years, Clark has used a trip-planning strategy that has allowed him to visit 49 states and almost every corner of the globe without spending a lot of money. His secret is surprisingly simple:

"My #1 rule of travel is buy the deal first and then figure out why you want to go there. By following that simple rule, I've been able to visit every continent except Antarctica and every state except North Dakota. And I've done it all on a dime."

In order to accomplish this, Clark does three things that you can do, too:

1. Don't Pick a Destination

How do you figure out where the deals are? [Kayak Explore](https://www.kayak.com/explore) is a tool that lets you find great airfare deals that fit your budget.

You simply select how much you're willing to pay and available destinations in your price range pop up on a world map. You can drill down further by season and month of travel.

2. Sign Up for Cheap Flight Services

Another way to approach the question of how to travel on the cheap is to sign up for any of a variety of cheap flight services. Clark likes and subscribes to all three of these to get the early word about the best airfare sales:

- [Scott's Cheap Flights](#)
- [Dollar Flight Club](#)
- [NextVacay](#)

Scott's Cheap Flights and Dollar Flight Club both operate on a freemium model. You can use a basic version of their services for free, but you have to pay to upgrade in order to access a more robust version of the service. Clark says the upgrade is worth it if you really love to travel.

3. Set Up Fare Alerts

Not everybody can be flexible and let the deal drive their travel plans all the time. If you have a place you know you need to go — maybe a wedding or a family reunion — your best bet is to set up fare alerts.

Fare alerts will let you know when the price on a particular route drops and by how much. This kind of pricing perspective can save you a lot of money.

"They'll be able to give you historical averages, telling you this fare is lower than normal by X number of dollars," Clark says.

Try setting up fare alerts on both [Google Flights](#) and [Kayak](#) to ensure you find the best deal.