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# The insider's guide to affordable America

These 25 money-saving secrets mean your next US holiday won't set you back a fistful of dollars, says Tyler Wetherall

On a road trip from Austin, Texas, to Los Angeles, California, we were lost along the old Route 66, now a scenic byway, somewhere in Arizona. We passed majestic red rock canyons as far as we could see, and then, unexpectedly, around dusk, we pulled into a bona fide ghost town. Not a soul traipsed the creaky boardwalks or frequented the saloon of Oatman; all that remained was a hoard of wild donkeys – ragtag survivors from the town's gold mining days – which resolutely blocked our way.

I later learned that by day Oatman is a tourist

destination where staged wild west shootouts stop traffic. But, for all its quirk and spookiness, it became one of the most memorable experiences of our road trip. And it was completely free.

According to the travel association Abta, one in three holidaymakers will cut back on holiday spending in the next year. It's not hard to understand why, with the pound rock bottom and the cost of travel abroad higher than ever – and nowhere more so than in the United States, with its unstopably strong dollar. But with grocery bills soaring, the weather bleak and the price of a pint

▲ Shake it up: a trip to a traditional diner is a quintessential American experience

in the pub growing faster than inflation, if there was ever a time to book a holiday, it is now – and tightening the purse strings needn't mean that your next US trip is off the table altogether.

British visitors tend to approach US excursions as dream "big trips" – long-haul, once-in-a-lifetime, bucket-list adventures that must tick all the boxes. Most associate it with big spending, too, with destinations like the notoriously expensive Walt Disney World Resort in Florida, or activities such as whitewater rafting in the Grand Canyon, which can cost thousands of dollars per person.

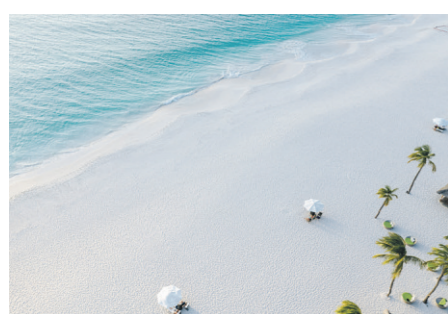
But there is another way to travel in the US without battling either crowds or costs (though perhaps the occasional errant donkey). It might involve swapping the Grand Canyon for a ghost town, or Orlando for Oklahoma City, even a hotel for an RV, or the city lights of Manhattan for a view of the Milky Way. But budgeting like this needn't mean sacrificing that "big trip" feeling either; and your big-ticket adventure might just be all the more meaningful for it, too.

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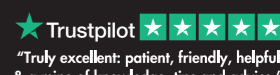
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## United States



Continued from page 13

### Take a road trip using an RV share app

Americans are in uproar over the price of petrol (96p a litre at time of writing), but it is still significantly cheaper than the £1.63 we pay in the UK. Car rental prices experienced a massive spike during the pandemic and are generally still high, but a spate of new firms now offer RV shares: think of it like

Airbnb for motorhomes, allowing you to hire a camper van directly from its owner. Outdoorsy (outdoorsy.com) lists vehicles from \$50-\$230 (£45-£205) a night – well below the cost of putting a family up in a hotel – including insurance and 24/7 roadside assistance.

### Find free museum days

There are some excellent free museums in the US, such as the Getty Center in Los Angeles (getty.edu) and the glut

of federally funded institutions in Washington DC – home to most of the Smithsonian's 19 museums (si.edu/museums).

Those museums which aren't typically free can charge upward of £30 for entry – but some also offer free entry or pay-what-you-wish deals on certain days. New York City's Guggenheim (guggenheim.org), for example, is pay-what-you-wish every Saturday between 4pm and 6pm, and the De Young in San Francisco (deyoung.famsf.org) is free

the first Tuesday of every month. Check local museum listings for details.

### Camp for free on public land

Camping is always a cheap and adventurous option, with a reserved campsite usually costing up to £50 a night. If you are looking to save even more, however, federal government land is largely free for you to pitch a tent on, especially spaces managed by the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. The downside? You're less likely to have amenities, but that just puts you closer to the nature you have come to enjoy.

Ogle views from the campsite on top of the 1,000ft cliffs above the San Juan River Canyon, Utah, or get a glimpse of the northern lights from your tent at Chena Hot Springs in Alaska. Park Rangers are your most reliable resource once on the ground, but you can also research ahead of time on apps such as AllTrails and Campnado.

### Dine out on restaurant weeks

During New York's most recent Restaurant Week (actually four weeks long), more than 600 eateries across the city offered two and three-course lunch and dinner menus from \$30-\$60 (£26-£52), making a meal at some usually alarmingly priced restaurants more feasible.

NYC Restaurant Week was launched in 1992 and similar events now take place across the nation, some twice a year and many of them weeks long, so if you time it right – and book early – you can fine dine for a fraction of the price. Try Dine Out Boston, Chicago Restaurant Week, Portland (Oregon) Dining Month, the month-long Flavor Palm Beach, or California Restaurant Month. A database of restaurant weeks is listed at findrestaurantweeks.com.

### See the sights with CityPASS

If you tend to go big on sightseeing, costs can add up fast. CityPASS sells discounted ticket packages to top tourist attractions in 15 cities, including New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Orlando. Costs and inclusions vary, so it's worth making sure the attractions offered are on your must-visit list – and that you have the stamina to make the most of it – but you can accrue savings of around 40 per cent on admission. For more information, visit citypass.com.

Other destinations offer an equivalent, such as New Mexico's CulturePass (newmexicoculture.org), which allows one visit to each state museum and historic site statewide for \$30 (£26).

### Eat at a diner

There is perhaps no greater emblem of Americana than the diner. Equivalent to our greasy spoon, it's where working-class communities come for a good, cheap meal and bottomless coffee at any time of day. New Jersey is the country's diner capital – home to more than 600 – but every state has its gems, from Mississippi's Ajax Diner, famed for its buttermilk cornbread, to Charlie Parker's Diner in Illinois, where your pancakes are on the house if you can finish the 16in stack. Consider it a budget-friendly front row seat of unfiltered American culture.

### Cross country with a rail pass

Train travel is not cheap in general in the US, but there's one hack that lets you

avoid the dreaded Greyhound to cross the country overland – and it's cheaper than car hire. Amtrak's USA Rail Pass costs \$499 and offers up to 10 segments of travel within a 30-day period.

You can hop on and off the train at more than 500 destinations, including journeying along some epic stretches of rail: the Sunset Limited route travels from New Orleans to Los Angeles passing breathtaking bayous and crossing the Rio Grande, while the California Zephyr climbs through the Rockies and into the snow-capped Sierra Nevada. Book at amtrak.com/USARailPass

### Visit Oklahoma – or other less obvious destinations

According to a recent Priceline survey, two of the top three cheapest destinations in the US are in Oklahoma. One is Oklahoma City, which combines cowboy culture with a cute arts scene – including quirky collaborative Factory Obscura (factoryobscura.com). Hotels here cost an average of just £78 per night.

The other is Tulsa, with hotels costing an average £82 a night, art deco architecture, and award-winning food – try the stalls at Mother Road Market (motherroadmarket.com). It also has an important history: Greenwood Rising museum (greenwoodrising.org) tells the story of the city's Greenwood District, once known as "Black Wall Street" for its African-American businesses – until the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Visit travelok.com for more information.

### Plan ahead

From flights and hotels to cars and buses, almost everything is cheaper if

you book ahead (for example, according to Expedia, booking international flights six months in advance saves an average of 10 per cent). This also gives you time to take advantage of setting price alerts for when the cost drops on your desired route, and to secure accommodation in some of the best budget hotels, motels, inns and glamping situations, which book up fast. Other flight hacks? It's cheapest to fly on a Tuesday or Wednesday.

### Tour Land Art destinations

The US is known for its endless expanses of wildly varied terrain, which for the great land artists of the 20th century offered one massive canvas. This movement – a response to the commodification of art by creating unsealable pieces – was part of the fledgling environmental awareness, depositing epic site-specific pieces around the country.

Most are free to visit, such as Robert Smithson's 1,500ft-long *Spiral Jetty* in Utah, made of mud, salt, crystal and rock, and often submerged by the tide; or Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*, also in Utah, which aligns with the sunrise and sunset. Dia Art Foundation maintains a number of land art sites, so it's well worth consulting diart.org

### Hit a dive bar

What the diner is to eating, so the dive bar is to drinking: an all-American institution. The best dive bars are dark unglamorous dens, oozing character and packed with relics from another era – both the clientele and the decor. Much like the pub, and just as divergent in quality, dive bars have been closing down around the US, replaced by

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▲ Wild ride: New Orleans has beautiful architecture, affordable food and music on every corner

upscale, uniform (read: dull) drinking establishments, but a good dive bar is worth its salt (such as Mac's Club Deuce in Miami, where happy hour begins at 8am). They all offer the ubiquitous "boilermaker": a spirit and beer combo typically taken as a shot followed by a beer chaser.

### Dine on a dollar slice in NYC

The dollar slice deserves its own entry, because it has fuelled the city's population since 1905 when an employee at Lombardi's in Little Italy (still open today: firstpizza.com) had the ingenious idea of selling a slice of pizza for 5¢. A regular slice now costs around \$3 on average, much to New Yorkers' chagrin, but a few 99¢ slice spots still exist. Either way, it's a steal for a piece of pie (as the Americans call it) as big as your head and dripping with cheese. Fold it in half to eat it like a true New Yorker.

### Pull up to the drive-in

Once on the verge of extinction, with just 318 theatres left in the US, the iconic 1950s drive-in cinema experience has experienced something of a renaissance. It began before the pandemic, but social distancing accelerated it, and the holdouts and newcomers now offer updated twists on the classic experience, like the Harvest Moon Drive-In in Illinois (harvestmoondrivein.com), which is powered by wind turbines, or Four Brothers in Amenia, New York (playeatdrink.com), which opened in 2014 and offers a sleepover cinema experience in a vintage Airstream caravan. They are also affordable, charging around \$20 (£17) per car.

### Walk the great trails

The US is home to a true bucket-list of great walking trails. The Pacific Crest Trail, made famous in Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild*, runs from the border of Mexico to the border of Canada, and takes in every terrain between, from the Mojave Desert to the volcano-capped Cascade Mountains in Washington state. Walking the entire thing takes up to six months, so for a more manageable experience, pick a section that interests you. The long-distance permit is free (although in limited supply).

Another epic (also free) long-distance hike is the Appalachian Trail: a 2,100-mile footpath along the Appalachian Mountain ridgelines between Maine and Georgia – perfect if you're after your own *Wild*-esque adventure. Visit nps.gov to plan your trip.

### Party in New Orleans

The Big Easy offers a lot of bang for your buck, and beautiful architecture to boot. It's impossible to avoid music in the French Quarter, where it blasts out of bars (often without cover charges) and follows you down the street, as you dance with a notoriously lethal Hurricane cocktail in hand (this is arguably the birthplace of the mixed drink, after all). There is also world-class affordable dining, from the shrimp po'boys (sandwiches) at longstanding Domilise's

◀ The best way to explore the outdoors? Rent an RV and head to mountainous Utah

▶ The Greenwood Rising museum Tulsa, Oklahoma tells the story of Black Wall Street, both before and after the race massacre of 1921

(domilisespoboy.com) to the celebrated Haitian food from newcomer Fritai (fritai.com). There are plenty of free activities on offer, from pay-what-you-like ghost tours to First Saturday gallery openings in the Arts District every month. Visit neworleans.com to plan your trip.

### Travel off-season

There is a knack to travelling off-season, a sweet spot when the prices are low but the weather is still bearable, and the crowds disperse. Wyoming's Jackson Hole is a notoriously ritzy ski destination, but between May and October the ski slopes become hiking destinations and Grand Teton National Park is on the doorstep. Chicago's bleak weather might make it unthinkable as a winter weekend break until you look at the price of flights, and then suddenly its museums and restaurant scene make it worth the journey.

### Drink your way through the craft brewery scene

There are more than 8,000 craft breweries nationwide and many have tapped into the boom by offering free tours and discounted tastings to lure visitors. Dogfish Head Brewery in Milton, Delaware, has an incredible facility – with a steampunk treehouse – and offers free tours including samples; or you could visit just about anywhere in Colorado, which has more breweries than any other state. Many craft beer destinations are now competing for tourists by offering brewery trail maps with discounts and incentives, like the Oregon Beer Trail (oregonsnorthcoast.com) or the app-based New York State Brewery Passport (thinknydrinkny.com/the-app).

### Maximise the America The Beautiful Pass

America's 58 national parks total some 84 million acres of dramatic landscapes,



▲ Under canvas: you can camp for free on public land, such as Olympic National Park in Washington state

truly wild wildlife (grizzlies, wolves) and the opportunity to experience true isolation – and that's before you have considered the 352 national monuments, battlefields and preserves under the American Park Service's protection.

If you are planning a cross-country family road trip, a Federal Recreational Lands Annual Pass – otherwise called the America The Beautiful pass – costs \$80 (£69) and covers entrance fees for the entire vehicle to over 2,000 sites, from Joshua Tree National Park in California to the home of Franklin D Roosevelt in New York. Most Federal sites where passes are accepted will also sell them, or visit the National Park Service website at nps.gov

### Game resale ticket sites

Find bargain tickets to games, shows and concerts on third-party ticket resale sites. Ticketmaster sells tickets to just

about everything, but the fees are higher – SeatGeek (seatgeek.com), meanwhile, has the advantage of comparing the price of tickets at several different resale sites, and StubHub (stubhub.com) is particularly good for sports events.

If you buy tickets within a week of the event, sellers are often more desperate to shift them. But to really score a bargain, avoid the big hits like *Hamilton* and the Super Bowl: there are plenty of excellent less-sought-after alternatives.

### Volunteer

It's not glamorous, but if you're happy to get your hands dirty, there are residential volunteer opportunities across most public land, from caring for the trails at a wildlife refuge in Louisiana to dressing up in 18th-century garb to greet visitors at a historic fort in New York. Other residential volunteer options are available from organisations such as the global Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network, which offers accommodation and meals on a farm in exchange for an agreed number of hours of labour – it sounds more appealing when you think about picking fruit in an orchard in Hawaii. Check out volunteer.gov to see the options.

### Explore the melting pot of American cuisine

While native American cuisine is receiving newfound attention, thanks to the hard work of some innovative indigenous chefs, the majority of the food consumed in North America stems from centuries of immigration. In the ethnically diverse cities of the US, you can find pockets of culinary delight from every culture on the planet, often priced for the community in which they are found. Head to Roosevelt Avenue in Queens, New York, for everything from Nepalese dumplings to Colombian

empanadas, or to Little Haiti in Miami, home to some of the best Caribbean fare in town.

### Stargaze under dark skies

The US boasts a growing list of Dark Sky Preserves – public parks, reserves and even towns certified by the International Dark-Sky Association for their efforts to reduce human light pollution – many of which also offer lodging or camping options. You can spend the night stargazing and appreciating both the unfiltered Milky Way and the wildlife that only comes out at night. In some sites, there are free night sky interpretive programmes and rangers will help you use park-owned telescopes, such as the Capulin Volcano in New Mexico which hosts "star parties" every Saturday in summer. Check darksky.org for a list of Dark Sky places.

### Order for two, not four

Food portion sizes in America's restaurants have doubled or even tripled over the past 20 years – this is the land of plenty after all. It is customary to get a to-go box for your leftovers, but if you don't want to cart around yesterday's dinner, then order accordingly: two adult meals will easily feed a family of four. Just don't scrimp on the tip – that's your server's wage!

### Sort out your currency exchange

Between cash withdrawal fees and the often ungenerous currency exchange rate, holiday costs can rack up fast – but innovations in the debit and credit card world mean you have options. Monzo charges no fees for purchases in any currency, and its Plus account allows up to £400 fee-free withdrawals abroad. Starling has the same basics, but no limits on withdrawals from foreign ATMs, and Revolut is better yet, using the interbank exchange rate, while its premium tier features include insurance – an essential for travel in the US.

### Find free things to do

A destination's free activities are sometimes the quirkiest or even the most cultured. In Austin, people gather nightly at the South Congress Bridge to watch its resident 1.5 million Mexican free-tailed bats fly off into the sunset. In New York City, Little Island (littleisland.org), the public park on New York's Hudson River, is free and often hosts family events. In Boston, the Freedom Trail (thefreedomtrail.org) is a free 2.5-mile walk past 16 of the city's most historic sites.

Come summer, many cities host free concerts or movie screenings in the park – or, as is the case in DC, free Shakespeare. Missouri's St Louis Zoo is free and genuinely excellent. The list goes on. And then, of course, there's the great American outdoors: plentiful, (mostly) free, and begging to be explored.



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