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Budget Traveler Interview: Alex Berger

by Jessica July 15th, 2011

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We love hearing from travelers, so we're starting a new series on Cheap Ticket Links in which we'll talk to one budget traveler each week. If you know someone – or are someone – we should talk to, please let us know!

This week's budget traveler is Alex Berger. Alex is the author of the travelogue VirtualWayfarer.com, as well as several other sites dedicated to packing and daily travel photos. His passion for travel was ignited at 11 when he set off for Europe with his parents and younger brother on a year long trip. Two years later the family struck out on a second year long trip R/Ving across the US. More recently Alex has traveled extensively with a focus on Europe and the Americas. He is in the process of relocating from Scottsdale, Arizona to Denmark to pursue a two year Masters in Communication and Cognition at the University of Copenhagen.

Do you like traveling on a budget? Why or why not?

I'm a budget traveler to the core, but that's not to say that I'm a bare-bones budget die hard. I prefer to travel like I'm on a general, daily average budget vs. a rigid day-to-day absolute, no exceptions budget.

I do hostels over hotels and take regional trains or buses over fast trains as much for the experience as for the financial savings. I like the added interaction, social camaraderie and forced creativity that goes with budget travel. Still, I'm not out to travel like a drifter, and if I had the funds I'd jump on conventional budget busters such as the opportunity to do an incredible helicopter tour or to hire a guide to hike a rural glacier.

Ultimately, I feel that budget travel means more adventure, and extra money to fund extended travel. It should be an enabler and motivator, not something that ends up as a central focus or prevents you from experiencing each and every destination completely.

What's your favorite budget-friendly location that you've ever visited?

Surprisingly, the Greek island of Crete in December. While still expensive compared to somewhere like rural Guatemala, a friend and I were able to comfortably travel on 50 Euro a day apiece – all while splurging on a hotel room, dining at sit down restaurants and enjoying local nightlife. Things were quiet, and we found that the prices for everything from dinner to our hotel room ended up being negotiable – and the weather, food and culture were incredible. The place I found surprisingly expensive? Argentina. It really caught me off guard and left my wallet sizzling.

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What do you do to make expensive destinations easier on the wallet?

I avoid expensive bar tabs, try and visit pricey destinations in saddle or off season, spend extra time figuring out if the museums etc. are free or discounted on specific days and spend more time outside of the tourist districts than normal.

Prague is a prime example. I was able to cut the cost of everything from food to beer and entertainment by 1/2 to 2/3 by spending 5 minutes walking away from the city center instead of towards it. I find that while there's some variation the cost of basic services in most "tourist" regions, especially in major tourist destinations, are usually pretty universal.

What are some things you consider to be worth the splurge when traveling?

Music (especially in awe inspiring venues), quality time with locals if I can return their hospitality, great food at a local hole in the wall, or small/personal tours that take me to places I would not normally be able to go.

If money were no object, do you think you'd still be more of a budget traveler or would you spend lavishly on travel? Why?

Definitely more of a budget traveler. The only area I'd splurge on would be things that allowed me to enrich my experience or go where I might not be able to otherwise. I mentioned helicopter tours previously and that's a prime example. Another would be expensive destinations like Antarctica or Svalbard. Places so rural that while there are discounted ways to see them, there's no real budget friendly way to get there.

What are some places where you have been able to save on travel that you think most people overlook?

My backpack. When I first started traveling I picked up an incredible Osprey pack which I love. The pack cost several hundred dollars and was too large to carry on. I now use a carry-on friendly \$30 backpack from Walmart and a small \$10 daypack. They've worked great for trips of 20 (or more) days, saved me a good bit of money, and have continued to save me a small fortune in checked baggage fees.

Another is buying rounds out at the bars. Sometimes it's unavoidable, and I know it gets talked about a lot - but ultimately it means you're not drinking what you want to drink and you're bleeding out money. It's important to remember that as a traveler it's not rude to let everyone take care of their own drinks.

The last is being more adventurous when eating. A lot of times people go somewhere dead set on eating a specific type of food. Pasta in Italy is a prime example. You can save a small fortune by either seeking out hole in the wall restaurants (people are always afraid of getting sick, which is silly - just take a probiotic) or by figuring out what the local budget/ethnic food is. I'm from Arizona, and a prime example here is Mexican food. As the saying goes - eat on the local economy.

Tell us about a "big save."

I was recently looking at flights to Argentina. Airfare was brutal from my home airport in Phoenix, Arizona. Even though it added an extra leg, I was able to knock over \$500 off the price of my airfare by flying a budget airline to Los Angeles, and then booking my airfare in/out of LAX. Creativity can save you a fortune.

What's the most over-priced part of travel - the budget-buster?

Transportation and more specifically airfare. With accommodation you have options from Couchsurfing to hostels and hotels. With airfare though, there are times when you're just stuck. I find airfare also makes up a significant portion of my trip cost.

What's the most embarrassing thing you do to save money (travel or not)?

Most embarrassing? Hah, that's top secret. But, I will confess that I wore a pair of jeans non-stop on a three month trip with only one quick break to wash them. I hate paying good money for laundry and tend to wash my shirts, socks, and underwear in the bathroom sink, then string them up all over the hostel room. Which is funny as I'm actually a very clean person and sensitive about making sure I don't smell...too fiercely. There are few things as unfortunate as having your damp boxers fall on your bunkmate's pillow randomly in the middle of the evening. I suppose one of them is actually being that bunkmate.

What are some super-affordable places to travel in the world right now?

Belize and Guatemala offer fantastic opportunities for cheap travel and amazing experiences - I can't wait to return to both. I've also heard great things about Thailand, Eastern Europe and Turkey though I haven't had the opportunity to explore them yet. Unfortunately, I've made a habit of traveling as cheaply as possible to expensive destinations. I'll tell you one place that isn't cheap - Norway. \$14 USD for a medium big-mac meal. I could buy a great rib-eye steak at a nice restaurant for the same price back home.

You'll find more information about Alex at his site Virtual Wayfarer; and he's on Twitter @AlexBerger.

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