

10 Caribbean destinations you can afford

Jamie Moore, SmarterTravel.com 3:51 p.m. EST January 24, 2013



(Photo: Paolo Carosso, LifeSciety.org)

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No vacation fund? No worries, mon. We've tracked down stylish budget guesthouses, the best street-food spots, and heaps of free or nearly free activities on 10 Caribbean islands. Here's a quick guide to saving in any season.

Dominican Republic

Save big in the Dominican Republic when you vacation where the locals do: the [Samana Peninsula](#) on the northeast coast. This natural paradise midway between [Punta Cana](#) and [Puerto Plata](#) is the antithesis of the country's resort towns but still offers plenty to do.

Do: For \$20 to \$80 (depending on your bartering savvy), ride horseback into the mountains, past coffee and cocoa plants, to the 120-foot [El Limon](#) waterfall. It's cheap to hire a boat to take you to [Los Haitises National Park](#) or the white-sand beaches of [Cayo Levantado](#). From January through mid-March, from the shore, you can see hundreds of migrating humpback whales mating, calving, and nursing in [Samana Bay](#).

Stay: The boutique beachfront [Villa Serena Hotel](#) in [Las Galeras](#) is \$110 to \$150 per night and includes breakfast.

Getting there: [JetBlue](#) has a new direct flight from New York to the Samana Peninsula for less than \$400 this winter. Check the airline's [Samana vacation packages](#).

READ MORE: [Which Caribbean all-inclusive is right for you?](#)

Jamaica

Jamaica's less touristy South Coast is a budget-friendly place to take in the country's laid-back vibe, [Red Stripe](#) in hand. Chat with local fishermen and stretch out on a beach without crowds in [Treasure Beach](#), just a two-hour drive south of [Montego Bay](#).

Do: Find cheap eats at the public beaches, where roadside stands serve up local favorites: curried goat and jerk chicken. Cruise a mile off the coast to [Floyd's Pelican Bar](#), a middle-of-the-ocean shack fashioned out of driftwood and palm fronds. Don't miss [YS Falls](#) for swinging on rope vines into secluded swimming holes.

Stay: Rates start at \$95 per night at [Treasure Beach's Jakes Hotel Villas & Spa](#), a collection of boho-chic cottages on a private beach. Farm dinners, yoga classes, and a waterfront spa add to the value.

Getting there: Even in winter, round-trip flights from New York City to Montego Bay are less than \$500 on [JetBlue](#), [Delta](#), [AirTran](#), and [Caribbean Airlines](#).

MORE IN JAMAICA: [Adults-only all-inclusives come with butlers, unlimited booze](#)

Puerto Rico

A two-hour drive west of San Juan leads to Puerto Rico's little coastal town of Rincon, where practically everything is negotiable. If you're a musician, try bartering part of your stay with a performance. Save on activities by pooling together new friends you meet on the beach or in the hotel. In Rincon, the bigger the group, the lower the rate.

Do: Learn to surf in one of the world's best surfing destinations. Rincon is also a great spot for seeing the humpback-whale migration in the winter. For an inexpensive lunch, try a hummus bagel and a peanut-butter-banana smoothie at [Banana Dang](#).

Stay: [Sunsets](#) are spectacular from the [Coconut Palms Inn's](#) studios and one-bedroom apartments (\$75 to \$125 per night). The grocery store is two blocks away, and local fishermen come to the hotel to sell guests the day's catch.

Getting there: Many major U.S. airlines fly into San Juan, where you can rent a car and drive the modern toll highway to Rincon.

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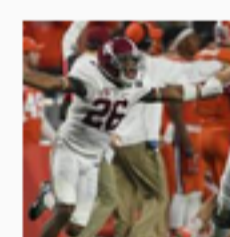
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St. Thomas

Shoppers get giddy at the mention of St. Thomas, and with good reason. The [U.S. Virgin Islands](#) have the highest duty-free allowance (\$1,600) in the Caribbean, and no other spot tops St. Thomas for retail volume and variety. Expect to score deals on perfume, jewelry, and electronics (30 to 60 percent off mainland U.S. prices).

Do: Name your price at downtown shops and Havensight Mall in [Charlotte Amalie](#). Order the \$79 [Virgin Islands Saver](#) coupon book online to save \$150 on boat trips and \$50 on zip-line tours in St. Thomas. For reasonably priced [Caribbean cuisine](#), try Cuzzin's or Gladys' Cafe.

Stay: Book a [St. Thomas inn](#) or [B&B package](#) through USVI Tourism in any season to get \$50 in dining certificates and \$50 in attractions vouchers. Several top-rated [TripAdvisor](#) hotels are included.

Getting there: Major carriers as well as low-cost airlines Spirit and JetBlue fly to St. Thomas year-round. Average fares from the northeast are around \$360 (but higher in the winter).

St. Croix

This U.S. Virgin Island satisfies budget travelers with affordable activities in every part of its varied landscape. St. Croix has historical sites and museums to explore, mountains and rainforests for hiking, and a marine sanctuary with great snorkeling. Seeing the island's beer-drinking pigs is a must on a [Frederiksted](#) pub crawl.

Do: The [Cruzan Rum Distillery](#) factory tour (\$5) in Frederiksted takes you around the massive vats and concludes with two mixed drinks at the bar. With the St. Croix Environmental Association, you can join sea-turtle talks, hikes, and other adventures for just \$10. Find tasty fish tacos at the waterfront RumRunners restaurant in [Christiansted](#).

Stay: In Frederiksted you can stay right on the beach at the [Cottages by the Sea](#) for \$115 per night. USVI Tourism offers [packages with \\$100 savings](#) at various St. Croix hotels.

Getting there: Fly direct to St. Croix on [American Airlines](#) and JetBlue.

Curacao

A camera and a comfortable pair of walking shoes will go a long way on a small budget in Curacao's capital city of [Willemstad](#). Awash in vibrant tropical hues, the 17th- and 18th-century [Dutch Colonial](#) buildings (on the [UNESCO World Heritage](#) list) are one of the Caribbean's most photographed cityscapes. Once you've explored downtown, hit the road to see more than 80 historical plantation homes around the island.

Do: Pick up fresh produce in downtown Willemstad's Floating Market. Grab a low-cost lunch where locals do: just down the street at the Old Market near the post office. Snorkelers and divers, don't miss a daytrip to [Klein Curacao](#), an uninhabited island eight miles offshore, with a long white-sand beach.

Stay: Rates at the five-star boutique Hotel [Kura Hulanda](#) start at \$149 per night.

Getting there: DAE ([Dutch Antilles Express](#)) flights average \$425 round-trip from Miami.

Trinidad and Tobago

The busiest and priciest time to visit this dual-island nation is around Carnival, when Trinidad and Tobago throw the Caribbean's biggest party. Visit another time and save with an itinerary of beach days, bartering in open-air markets, and seeing the capital's colonial-style buildings.

Do: The islands' street food—roti, doubles (chickpea pockets), curried crab, and dumplings—is plentiful, tasty, and cheap. Try Miss Trim's at Store Bay on Tobago. Also popular: fresh seafood on warm rolls at Richard's Shark & Bake stand in Trinidad. Work off the carbs on a \$60 nighttime bioluminescent tour by kayak or paddleboard with Radical Sports Tobago.

Stay: Stay in the country's capital city, just around the corner from the president's home, at the affordable 17-room [Coblentz Inn](#). [Sea turtles](#) nest on the [Mt. Plaisir Estate Hotel's](#) beach from March through August.

Getting there: A handful of U.S. airlines fly direct to Trinidad and Tobago, but the country's national carrier, Caribbean Airlines, generally posts the best prices and schedules.

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Though it's popular with the yachting set, reasonable lodging and abundant natural attractions make St. Lucia accessible for budget travelers. (Photo: St. Lucia Tourist Board)

St. Lucia

This lush, low-key island, evangelized by luxury-seeking honeymooners and the yachting set, is fabulous even when you're on a budget. St. Lucia has small hotels with modest rates as well as plenty of natural wonders and weekly street parties to keep you entertained.

Do: Skip the private charters and expensive boat trips and bring your own snorkeling gear. From land, you can access great snorkeling sites at Pigeon Island and the beaches along the north shore. Soak in a mud bath and drive into a volcano at Sulphur Springs Park. On Friday night, Carnival-like street parties in the [Anse La Raye](#) fishing village roll into the wee hours with fish fries, reggae, and dancing.

Stay: On the west coast, the intimate [Hummingbird Beach Resort](#) (\$90 per night) is only a five-minute walk from the town of [Soufriere](#).

Getting there: Check St. Lucia's tourism site's [Low Fare Watch](#) for flight deals in the coming months.

Tulum, Mexico

A 90-minute drive south of Cancun on the Caribbean's western edge, Tulum enchants with its eco-chic style. Along this stretch of mostly undeveloped coastline, a rented bicycle (\$15 for the day) sets the local pace for cruising between quiet beaches, relaxed cafes, and beachfront cabanas.

Do: At the Tulum archaeological site (\$5 admission), descend the steep staircase to the beach and swim out to get an interesting view of the cliff-top ruins. For \$3.50 to \$10, you can swim in a group of freshwater cenotes nearby. Eat seafood at El Tabano, which uses solar heating to cook, or salsa dance to live music at the Habana Cafe rooftop bar.

Stay: Do yoga at [Maya Tulum Resort](#) or attend bikini boot camp at [Amansala Resort](#). Rates start at \$110 per night in thatched-roof cabanas at both resorts.

Getting there: The [ADO Public Bus](#) runs frequently from [Cancun International Airport](#). Or hire a shared colectivo shuttle, a minibus at a low rate.

Bahamas

Though the islands of the Bahamas are technically just outside the [Caribbean Sea](#), we couldn't resist mentioning their affordability. Getting to [Nassau](#) is cheap and easy. Hop a flight in Miami and you're there in 55 minutes. You need not venture far for deals.

Do: Bargain hunters will find savings of up to 50 percent on U.S. prices at the high-end duty-free shops on Bay Street. A short walk away is the Straw Market, where you can test your negotiating skills and pick up souvenir T-shirts, three for \$10. 'Da Fish Fry' at [Arawak Cay](#), a festive strip of Nassau bars and restaurants, dishes out fresh conch salad, fritters, fried fish, and \$20 lobster.

Stay: Book at [Comfort Suites Paradise Island](#), next door to [Atlantis Resort](#), and get free access to Atlantis' nine waterslides, 11 pools, tubing river, rock-climbing walls, and more.

Getting there: American Airlines and [Bahamasair](#) fly daily from Miami for less than



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\$300 this winter. For AARP members, a [three-night Bahamas cruise](#) is \$169.

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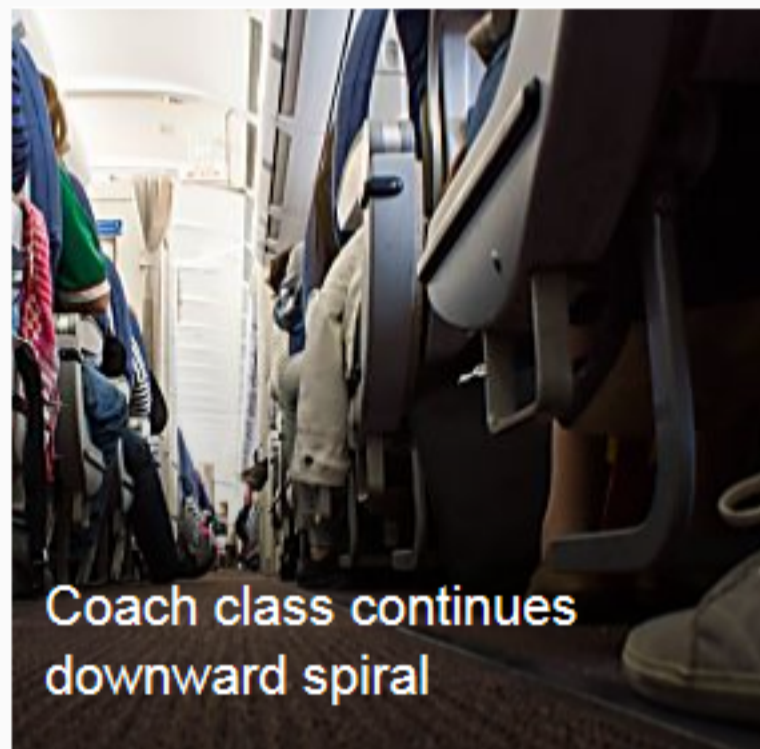
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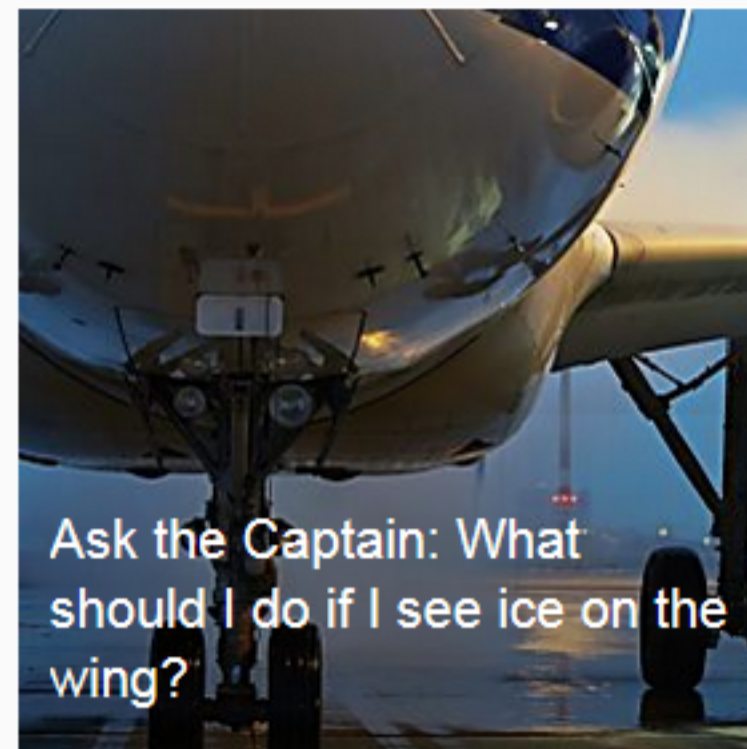
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