

Making the Most of Meals while Traveling

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For many, planning your next travel adventure can be just as enjoyable as the trip itself. It is fun to daydream about where you will stay, how you will get there, and what you will do when you arrive — but what about the food you plan to eat during your travels? Research suggests meals and other food items can make up 25 percent of your travel budget. We look for deals and steals where we stay; however, we can also be strategic in planning, preparing, and purchasing food on vacation to ensure we still have exciting, nutritious, and cost-conscious meals. Food, like lodging and transportation, is a nonnegotiable vacation expense because you must get to your destination, have a place to sleep each night, and have food to eat each day. Saving money on meals leaves extra cash available for making memories or perhaps, extending the length of your vacation.

By Plane, Train, or Automobile

Lodging and transportation options can vary depending on your budget and location. From the mountains to the beach, and every city in between, there are ways to maximize your vacation meal options while minimizing your costs. Regardless of where your travels take you, this publication will provide strategies and considerations for healthy and budget-friendly meals every step of the way.



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Meal Planning Before You Go

Optimize your lodging search. Most people use digital platforms to research and book lodging and vacation rentals. These platforms typically have search filters you can apply when exploring your options. When making overnight reservations, use these filters to find rentals that have kitchens, kitchenettes, or even outdoor grills. This provides space and options for healthy meal preparation while traveling.

Many rentals include a list of standard items stocked in the kitchen. If this is not provided, contact the vacation rental company to inquire about what basics are provided. This could include pantry items, kitchen equipment and appliances, and other cooking staples. Also ask about whether other cooking-related items are provided, such as paper towels, kitchen linens, or grilling supplies. For camping and hotel adventures, you will need to consider meals that maximize cooking equipment to minimize space as you pack.

If you are considering a dining package or all-inclusive meal option, take the time to calculate whether it will save you money in the long run. Prepackaged plans can help you save money on food expenses, but it depends on the size of your travel party and the amount each person typically eats or snacks in a day. Many facilities charge premiums for children regardless of age or how much they actually eat, so it may be more cost-effective to buy a la carte or meal share. Another consideration is whether you would enjoy eating meals away from the resort. Crunching numbers ahead of time will help you choose the best option for your family.

Map out your meals. As you plan for your vacation, also consider which meals you will eat at restaurants and make advanced reservations when possible. You can make dining reservations six months to a year in advance for popular tourist destinations and holiday seasons, and up to 90 days in advance for many restaurants. This allows you to preview menus and prices, and realistically estimate the cost for your family to dine out. If choosing eat-in restaurants, reviewing menus in advance simplifies meal selection giving special consideration to nutritious options that meet specific dietary needs. Browse kids' menus for a variety of options including fruits and vegetables. There are several mobile apps available that allow you to research restaurants and menus in a specific geographic area and even make reservations. If you do choose to dine out, make sure that all family members are aware of your plans concerning desserts or drinks as both can

add significant dollars to your total bill.

For each day of your trip, create a meal plan to keep you organized and on track. Can you save money by eating a continental breakfast in your hotel or choosing shelf-stable items to have on hand? Depending on where your travels take you, you can pack a cooler or picnic lunch to eat at a state park, lake, or beach. If you are visiting an amusement park or museum, is returning to the car an option to grab a quick, pre-packed lunch?

Dining-in considerations. Just like you plan meals out, you can also plan meals in. If your lodging includes a kitchenette, plan meals in advance and complete with an assignment schedule for cooking, cleanup, grilling, or any other tasks required for the meal preparation in your rental. If traveling in a large group or with multiple families, pretravel meetings ensure that everyone is on board with the plan. Evaluate the type of food prep space available and brainstorm meal options. As you identify meals that maximize available cooking equipment, make lists of groceries and supplies necessary for each recipe. Watch for sales on shelf-stable items at your local grocery store and stock up on items you can buy in advance. Save money and space by buying items you can use for more than one meal. Remember, if you plan to stay in a hotel or resort, there are still ways to save money and control the quality of your food choices. Packing quick breakfast and snack items of yogurt, fruit, and granola bars or using amenities provided with your lodging, are often time- and cost-saving options.

On the Way

Pack snacks. When departure day arrives, this tip is crucial, especially if you are traveling with kids. Encourage each child to "build" their own snack boxes, in lunch boxes for example, to keep on-hand when traveling. Look for inexpensive containers for snack options at local dollar or discount stores. Each child could personalize their own box with stickers and other craft supplies. Children will be more excited about packed snacks when they contribute to the planning process. Purchase a few "special" snacks not eaten often to add to the novelty and fun. Snack boxes will save you money when you stop to refuel or when running through the airport. Great options include dried nuts and seeds, trail mix, dried fruit, or jerky. Fresh fruit, like bananas, mandarin oranges, and grapes, are also a convenient, healthy choice. And because we all know traveling doesn't always go as planned — there may be hiccups such as flight delays or car trouble — having snacks on hand can keep your family fueled and save money while waiting.

Hydrate from home. Travel with reusable water bottles for each person in your party when possible. The savings can add up quickly, as the price of a bottled water at gas stations or airports is typically inflated. If traveling by plane, keep it empty until you are past security. Most airports have water bottle filling stations. Conversely, if traveling by car, start your trip with a full water bottle or travel cup, and keep a small cooler in the car filled with water bottles so you will always have refills on hand. Coffee lovers should also plan to bring a travel coffee mug. Most rentals and hotels have in-suite coffee makers or free coffee in the lobby, which can save you money as you caffeinate.



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While You Are There

Stick to the plan. It may be tempting to stray from the plan once you arrive at your destination but considering the investment of time and energy you have put into planning meals and snacks will keep you on track. There are advantages of choosing to dine in while on vacation. Wait times at many popular restaurants may be long, especially for larger parties, and it may be difficult to entertain young children for extended periods of time before and during the meal. Another advantage to dining in is that it allows you to work around schedules and routines of babies and young children while traveling.

If your lodging includes a cabin, condo, or house rental with a kitchen or kitchenette, bring as many of the ingredients needed to cook your pre-planned meals as your space will allow. If traveling by car, pack your own ingredients, spices, and condiments to save money and eliminate waste. The cost of groceries is often higher at tourist destinations, so you may pay a premium if you wait to shop until you reach your destination. If you are traveling by train or plane, pack shelf-stable ingredients or snacks in your

luggage. If shopping once you arrive is unavoidable, look for ways to minimize costs. Consider placing a grocery order online near your destination for delivery or pickup when you arrive. Shopping online can save you money by eliminating impulse buys, as well as allowing you to keep tabs on your running grocery bill as you add items to the cart. If you do not place an online order, shop from a list to avoid forgetting important items and making impulse purchases.

Use what you have. If staying at a hotel or resort, small in-room appliances, like refrigerators, microwaves, and coffee pots, provide you more flexibility for healthy, budget-friendly meals and snacks. Keep chilled milk, yogurt, and fresh fruit on hand. It allows you to save leftovers from meals out and eat them the next day for lunch. Even the coffee pot can help you “cook.” Make hot water in the coffee pot and easily prepare oatmeal for breakfast or a cup of soup for lunch or dinner right in your hotel room.

Plan to eat the breakfast your hotel offers or enjoy a simple breakfast you can eat on-the-go, include a packed lunch or small lunch out, and make dinner a special treat in the evenings.

Alternatively, you could make lunch out your special treat, as lunch menus are often more budget-friendly with smaller portion sizes, and then enjoy a smaller dinner. To save money when dining out, also consider sharing entrees or eating leftovers the next day for lunch.

Think strategically. If you know you will eat out a set number of days while traveling, think about making those the first and last days of the trip. After traveling to your destination, you may not be as interested in preparing a meal, so a good option may be to dine out. Similarly, the last night of the trip is usually devoted to packing and cleaning so you may want the ease of dining out or ordering takeout.

If you are traveling with friends or family, a meal planning committee can make light work of the chore of feeding a crowd. Sharing responsibilities, such as meal planning, purchasing, preparation, and clean-up, can make it fun. Additionally, letting each family unit know in advance that they are expected to contribute their resources (time and money) will make the trip more enjoyable for everyone. Finally, a coordinated plan for recipes, ingredients (both purchased and those

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brought from home), and supplies will eliminate duplication and save time and space.

Making Vacation Meals Healthy

Individuals who prepare more of their own meals are more likely to consume the recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. This is still possible even while traveling. If you are staying in a hotel, many provide a continental breakfast that includes eggs, oatmeal, or whole-grain cereal options. Almost all offer a fruit bowl with apples, bananas, or oranges, which are also great choices. You could even grab a piece of fruit for a snack later in the day. Even if you choose to sleep in while on vacation, breakfast should remain a priority. Breakfast starts the day on the right foot, and you will be less likely to over-indulge later in the day.

Whatever meal you are preparing or eating, commit to serving vegetables at every meal. For example, if you stay at a place with a kitchen,

you could wake up and make veggie omelets, have sandwiches with lettuce and tomato and raw veggies on the side for lunch, and a nice side salad with your dinner. Even if you choose takeout for dinner while on vacation, purchase just entrees and add your own sides of family-favorite veggies. For additional tips about making healthy choices while dining out, see the publication FCS 3-607: *Dining Out the Healthy Way*.

Making Vacation Meals Fun

Vacations are all about making special memories and having fun. There is no reason mealtime cannot be a part of that. Think outside the box about how you can make meals seem special while not breaking the bank.

- Host cooking competitions between family members and friends traveling together.
- Make prepared meals more exciting by building them around themes, such as pizza and a movie night or build-your-own-taco or

-potato bar.

- Bring a cooler to make picnics part of the trip. You can easily pack a lunch for a day on the beach or while out exploring a new location. Make it a goal to find the best place for a family picnic.
- Try a new type of food or ethnic cuisine. Destination places typically have a larger variety of cuisine options. You may be exposed to new fruits and vegetables and could learn something about a different culture. Use the opportunity to step out of your comfort zone a little and have fun.
- Talk to locals and see what they recommend.
- Include your entire family in vacation week meal planning and preparation.
- Budget for occasional treats like dessert after dinner or sweet treats from local spots such as ice cream parlors. The price of daily treats, however, can add up quickly for a family. Consider sharing specialty snacks to reduce portion size and

price while still giving everyone a decadent taste.

- Rather than purchasing sweet treats every night, have an ice cream sundae party at your rental. Pack ice cream cones, sprinkles, candies, and other toppings to save money and only purchase the ice cream when you arrive. This cost-effective option allows you to include nutritious toppings like fruit and nuts and control portion sizes.

Planning Pays Off

You should approach travel just as you would any other “big ticket” purchase. If you budget appropriately, begin saving in advance, and give yourself adequate time to plan and prepare, you will find that your vacation is relaxing and enjoyable. If you are concerned that the cost of food while traveling will be too expensive, a creative solution may be purchasing gift cards throughout the year for the grocery store or supermarket you will use while on vacation. This spreads out the cost of groceries over time and may help you budget and plan in the months leading up to the big trip.

Vacations are an investment of your time, energy, and expenses. You should not overlook intentionally planning your meals when traveling or leave it until your trip begins. Start saving as early as possible. Within three to six months before your vacation window, set your food budget and begin to map out your meals. By intentionally choosing to cook what you can, weighing dine-out versus dine-in options, and packing healthy snack options, you will stretch your vacation dollars as you make healthier food choices for your family.

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