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the best bargains now

Want to get away but worried about your wallet? Check out these five budget-friendly destinations that offer seriously cheap thrills. By Cemile Kavountzis



why it's a deal

Traveling during nonpeak season, from April to November, in exchange for less expensive rooms (we're talking up to half off!) is a big trend. Don't worry, hurricane season doesn't warm up until June or so.

value hotels

When the clock strikes midnight on April 1, the prices at **Secret Harbour** in St. Thomas drop a whopping 43 percent from its high-

season rate of \$325 and up. Located on the island's quieter east side, all of the buildings are waterfront and you can snorkel right on the property's cove-like beach (from \$185; **SecretHarbourVI.com**; 340-775-6550).

Look around and you'll find that high season begins and ends on different days from hotel to hotel. **The Estate Concordia Studios** on St. John offers pretty good prices year-round, but the real discounts come in mid-April when they lower their prices by a third (from \$105; **Maho.org**; 800-392-9004).

budget bites

Amalia Café is a cute, couple-owned joint offering Spanish-style tapas and fish (**AmaliaCafe.com**; 340-714-7373). **Off the Hook** restaurant in St. Thomas has prime harbor views—be sure to order the calamari drenched in a coconut curry (340-775-6350).



fun on the cheap

DAY-TRIP IT TO

ST. JOHN It's a short boat ride to St. John. The prettiest beaches? Trunk Bay and Hawksnest Bay.

CHASE BUTTERFLIES

Yes, seriously. **The Butterfly Farm** has species from all over the world (**TheButterflyFarm.com**; 340-715-3366).

GO ON AN ECO-TOUR

You'll see small islands in a lagoon of mangroves, plus deserted Cas Cay (**VEcotours.com**).

TAKE A POWER WALK

Slip on a pair of sneakers and hike through the lovely **Virgin Islands National Park** (**NPS.gov/viis**).

GET YOUR GROOVE

ON Catch a reggae band on Fridays at **The Greenhouse** (**TheGreenhouseRestaurant.com**).

CHILL OUT

Order banana daiquiris at **Mountain Top** and take in the spectacular views (**Greathouse-MountainTop.com**).



The InterContinental Westlake Hanoi: How's this for a water view!

**GREAT
EXCHANGE
RATE**
★ vietnam ★

why it's a deal

Your dollar still has buying power (17,169 dong on the dollar*), and if you're willing to go the distance (yes, you'll have to plunk down more on airline tickets), you can stay in luxury hotels for less, eat on the cheap and get great bargains. No wonder US travel there has increased more than 20 percent lately!

value hotels

Go ahead and splurge on lodging—especially when the price tag on rooms at hot spots like the **Park Hyatt Saigon** starts at \$260 (Saigon.Park.Hyatt.com; +84-8-3824-1234). In Hanoi, the waterfront **InterContinental Westlake Hanoi** costs a third of the InterContinental Paris Le Grand's average \$600* a night (whoa!) and neighbors the 800-year-old Golden Lotus Pagoda (from \$210; InterContinental.com/hanoi;

+84-4-62708888). Besides getting fabulous deals in Vietnam's crowning cities, you can stay in seaside resorts that would cost you double the price elsewhere. **The Sunrise Beach Resort Nha Trang** is completely blinged out—there's even a colonnaded pool if the grand entryway isn't glitzy enough (from \$137 Internet rate; SunriseHotelVietnam.com; +84-58-3822866).

budget bites

You can't possibly go to Vietnam without eating pho, a slow-simmered rice noodle soup topped with beef or chicken, at **Pho Hoa** in Ho Chi Minh City (+84-8-829-7943). In Hanoi, **Cha Ca La Vong** has only one dish on the menu, the cha ca, which features fried fish served over rice noodles. This one-hit wonder has earned itself major cult status among foodies all over the globe (+84-4-825-3929).



Visit the famous fish market in Hoi An by 7 a.m. to catch the action.

fun on the cheap

SPEND A DAY IN HALONG BAY The bay's limestone rock formations, lagoons and caves make it one of Vietnam's natural wonders.

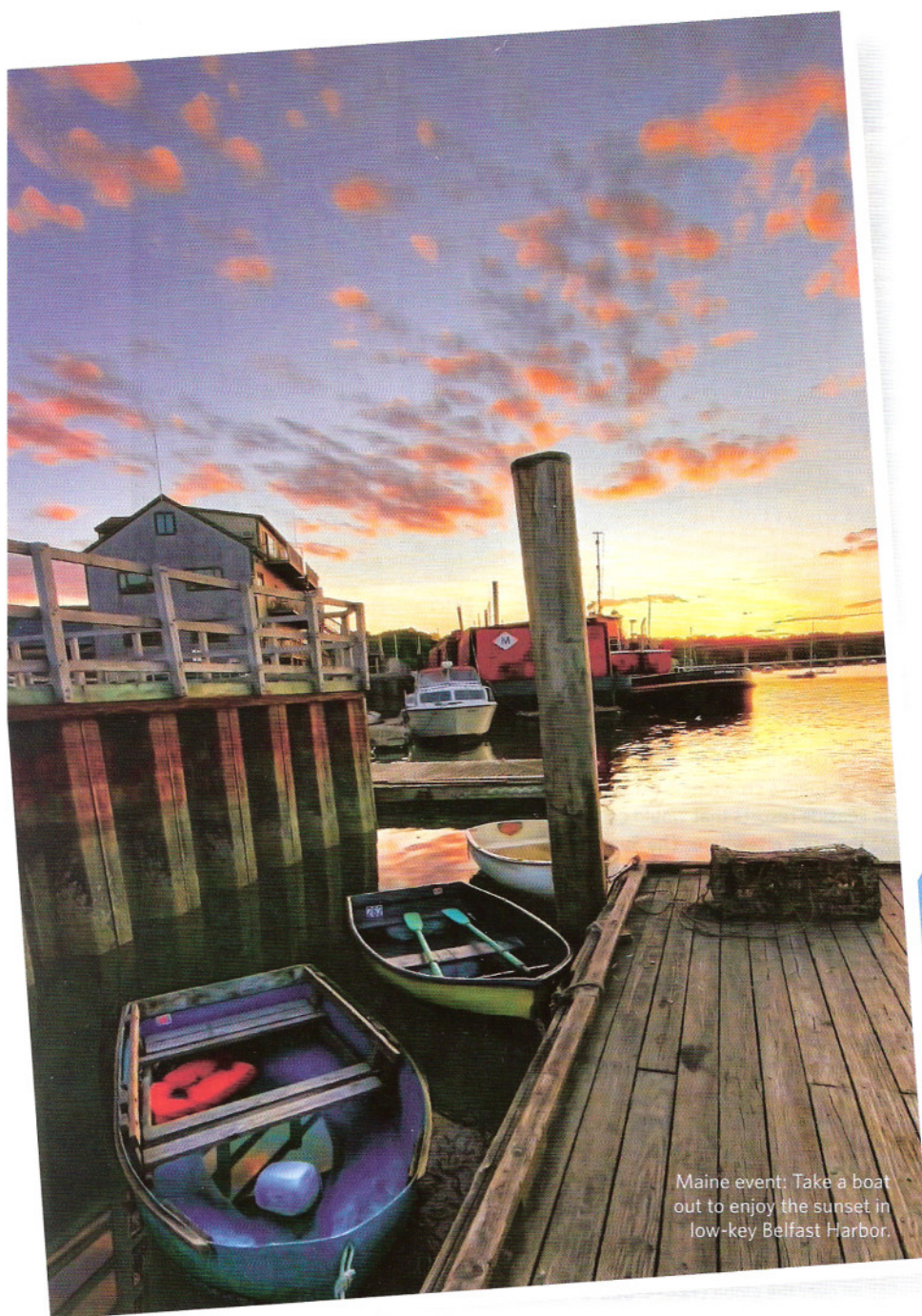
SHOP THE STREET MARKETS Bargain for loot at the famous **Ben Thanh Market** on Le Lois Street in Ho Chi Minh City.

VISIT THE CITY OF LOVE The French built a little Paris on Dalat's hilltop plateau, which became Vietnam's honeymoon capital.

HOP ON A MOTORBIKE TAXI Short trips can cost less than a dollar and drivers charge a buck an hour for tours.

SEE HANOI'S FRENCH QUARTER The tree-lined boulevards are reminiscent of what was once the grand capital of French Indochina.

SAMPLE THE STALLS Street food is cheap (and tasty) here, so check out the lively night bazaars where the locals nosh. >



Maine event: Take a boat out to enjoy the sunset in low-key Belfast Harbor.



why it's a deal

Ever heard of Belfast? That's why it's so cheap. This cute seaside town lacks a flashy tourism board, big-brand hotels and inflated prices! Go now, before word gets out, and you'll still find low-priced B&Bs, quirky art galleries and homey restaurants.

value hotels

Belfast has charming bed-and-breakfasts with colonial-style architecture and antique-laden rooms. At the **White House**, each room has its own name and character (from \$125; MaineBB.com; 207-338-1901).

At **The Harbor View House of 1807**, rooms are more pared-down, but you'll enjoy claw-foot bathtubs, classy fireplaces and a view of Penobscot Bay. Stay for three nights from April 4 to June 29 and they'll knock 20 percent off your tab (from \$105; HarborViewHouse.com; 877-393-3811).

leave on a Tuesday...

It's one of the cheapest days to fly.

budget bites

Don't miss lunch at **Chases' Daily Restaurant**, a highly regarded vegetarian eatery—they get a lot of produce from their nearby farm (207-338-0555).

For dinner, walk past the tugboats on Marshall Wharf to **Three Tides**. They have super-fresh seafood and a brewery (calling all beer nerds!). There's even a bocce court out back (3Tides.com; 207-338-1707).

fun on the cheap

HIT THE FARMERS' MARKET Local goods, like honey, crafts and cheeses, make for perfect gifts and souvenirs (BelfastFarmersMarket.org).

VISIT FORT KNOX You won't find gold bars at this park, but you will catch some great views (FortKnox.MaineGuide.com).

CHECK OUT WATERFALL ARTS Head to this art center for nature-based installations (WaterfallArts.org; 207-338-2222).

PADDLE UP **Kayak** in the peaceful Penobscot Bay. *Psst...* it's prettiest when you're gliding through moonlit waters (TouringKayaks.com).

SHOW LOBSTER LOVE Don your bib and feast on the fresh shellfish at **Young's Lobster Pound** (207-338-1160).

CATCH OUTDOOR CONCERTS On Thursday nights in the summer, local bands put on shows. Rock out—no one will recognize you!

read the
fine print

Many Panama
hotels list per-
person rates.



why it's a deal

While prices have been steadily rising in trendy eco-tourism spots like Costa Rica, you can still score a great deal in Panama. It has the same type of vibe: lush rainforests and secluded beaches, and isn't any harder to get to. What's not to love?

value hotels

Late spring is the start of green (i.e. rainy) season in Panama, which means there are lower rates at eco-chic resorts in the rainforest and on the beach—don't worry,

it's really not dreary now; but later in the year, it does get a lot wetter. In Soberanía National Park (just 20 minutes from Panama City), the **Canopy Tower** hotel is perched on a forest-covered hill with views of the Panama Canal (from \$263 per couple, including meals and bird tour; **CanopyTower.com**; 800-930-3397).

If quiet beaches are more your pace, head northeast of Panama City to the San Blas Islands for amazing snorkeling and diving. The sustainable **Coral Lodge** is a getaway with bungalows that kiss the sea

(from \$360 per couple, including meals, snorkeling equipment and kayak rentals; **CoralLodge.com**; +507-317-6754).

budget bites

Eat for dirt cheap at the local joints—\$3 is all you'll need at **Café Coca Cola** in Casco Viejo, Panama City's historic district; but even at the nicer spots, you're golden. For what you'd spend at a place like the Olive Garden in the US, you can have a high-end Panamanian meal at **Barandas** restaurant (**TheBristol.com**; +507-264-0000).

Walk on water with your
tropical drink at the
Coral Lodge's beach bar.

fun on the cheap

VISIT THE PANAMA CANAL It's actually pretty. Watch ships from **Miraflores Visitors Center** (**PanCanal.com**; +507-276-8325).

STROLL THROUGH CASCO VIEJO Panama City's picturesque, must-see Old Town is flanked with colonial churches, beautiful plazas and even a presidential palace.

BAR-HOP Panama City has an always-buzzing nightlife. Go to Calle Uruguay near the bay for cool watering holes and dance clubs.

BE A CITY SLICKER Visit **Metropolitan Natural Park**—a rainforest within Panama City (**Parque Metropolitano.org**).

BUY AMAZING HANDICRAFTS Along the San Blas Archipelago, you can score *molas* (bright handmade textiles) for just a couple of bucks apiece!

TRY ISLA TABOGA This one-road island is 13 miles offshore from Panama City. On weekends, local anglers will take you to snorkeling spots. >



why it's a deal

Bundling your hotel, meals, taxes and airfare into one flat price makes sense in Puerto Vallarta, which can be a bigger bargain than popular spots like Cancun and Cabo. Besides the pretty Pacific-bordering beaches, it has hip bars and good shopping.

value hotels

Cutting out the middle man usually saves you dough—except when that middle man happens to be an online booking site. A package with air at the recently renovated beachfront **Buenaventura Grand Hotel & Spa** via Travelocity.com may cost hundreds

less (room, meals, taxes and airfare at around \$380 per couple per night*; **Hotel Buenaventura.com.mx**; 888-859-9439).

Another way to take the package-deal route is to try **LastMinute.com**. Log on up to two weeks before you want to get away and enjoy slashed prices for airlines and hotels that need to fill up at the very last minute. An affordable PV option is the **Samba Vallarta by Pueblo Bonito**, which overlooks one of the best beaches on Banderas Bay and boasts hacienda-style architecture with airy oversize rooms

(room, meals, taxes and airfare at around \$330 per couple per night*; **SambaVallarta.com**; 800-990-8250).

budget bites

For lunch, try the tacos at **Marisma**, a shack that sells them for less than a buck fifty. If you day-trip out to Sayulita, nosh at **Sayulita Fish Taco** for about \$2 a taco. At night, **El Arrayán** owner Carmen Porras serves up local family-inspired recipes (ElArrayan.com.mx; 52-322-222-71-95).

fun on the cheap

WHIZ ACROSS A CANOPY Take a zipline through the lush Sierra Madre rainforest (**Canopy Tours Vallarta.com**; 877-563-4113).

BOOK MASSAGES Unwind at **Venus Sunshine Massage and Spa** together. They have decent prices and a very professional staff (22 Paseo de la Marina).

TEE OFF There are seven golf courses in the PV area. Book at **VallartaOnline.com/golf** and you can knock up to 57 percent off the price.

LEARN TO SURF Since Puerto Vallarta sits on the Pacific side of Mexico, Banderas Bay is a prime area for first-time wave riders to dive in and test the waters. [n]

Beached out? Visit the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in pretty Puerto Vallarta.