

## travel lite

**T**ravelling alone can be one of the best ways to see and experience a new destination; you get to do what you want, and when you want to do it. However, solo travel isn't necessarily cheap. One of the biggest complaints from solo travellers is that they either have to pay single supplements or share a room with a stranger. While there's more freedom to travelling alone, it also means that you're not able to share the cost of renting a car, fuel or dining out. So, how can you get good deals when travelling alone?

### Research, research, research

Any independent traveller will tell you that research into the destination is an essential part of holiday planning; knowing when to go, where to go and what to do at the most competitive prices are key. Seah Lu Sean makes it a point to read travel websites for tips from other travellers. Seah, who travels solo at least once a year, recommends the Thorn Tree forum on Lonely Planet or virtualtourist.com. "You can get helpful advice from others who have visited the same places. I managed to save the cost of one leg of a journey when flying from Laos to Vietnam because I took a flight bound for Hanoi from a smaller airport in Laos," says the 30-something business development manager, who spends about RM500 for a long weekend or a few thousand ringgit for a longer holiday.

### Look for promotions on airfare

The increasing competitiveness in the airline industry, especially with the offering of "zero fares", is good news for the traveller. But as oil prices continue to climb, air travel is still not cheap, what with rising

## Solo travel

How to get the best deals when travelling alone, and have a blast doing it. By Sreerema Banoo



fuel surcharges and additional costs like fees for checked-in baggage. Nonetheless, given that the airfare usually makes up the largest chunk of their travel budget, getting a good deal on it is high on most solo travellers' list. Seah recommends booking as far ahead as possible. "There are also a many flight aggregator websites such as kayak.com that compare prices," she adds. Christina T Chew, executive director of ProHighway Travel Sdn Bhd, says it's always a good idea to travel during the low or off-peak seasons. "You should also consider joining a group. Sometimes, agents sell off the last few seats at a cheaper price," she says. She adds that websites like lastminute.com

(not available in Asia) also allow solo travellers to score deals on holiday packages.

### Look for bargains on accommodation

Accommodation is usually the biggest stumbling block for solo travellers unless you are willing to go for dormitory-style accommodation, says Seah. "I usually look for the smaller establishments and try to negotiate with them. If it's off-peak season, they can be quite accommodating," she says, adding that offering to forgo items like breakfast will usually get you a better deal.

Bargains, says Chew, can also be had if you arrive at your destination

later in the day. "Often, bed and breakfast operators are willing to reduce the price just to fill their beds." You can also look for deals, for example, three nights' stay for the price of two. Where possible, Chew suggests, opt for bed-and-breakfast inns or self-service apartments that offer more competitive rates compared with hotels.

### Stay on the outskirts of the city

To reduce your accommodation bill, choose to stay away from the city centre. For instance, if you're visiting New York, stay in New Jersey, which is only 30 minutes away, offers Chew. "If you're visiting Hong Kong, stay in Kowloon, which is cheaper by some 30%."

Savvy travellers point out that even if you need to commute to the city, where most of the tourist sights are located, it's still a cheaper option especially if you take the public transport after rush hour or when you're travelling alone.

### Cook your own food or go local

For most travellers, sampling the local food when on holiday is a big part of the experience. "Most of the time, I want to sample the daily fare of the locals, with a couple of splurges in a reputable restaurant as a treat," says Seah. Chew points out that eating out needn't be expensive if you're a solo diner. "Look out for special menus. For example, in Paris, you can find deals offering three-course set lunches or dinners at affordable prices." If you're staying at a self-service apartment, cook your own food. "Many supermarkets mark down on bread, pastries and certain foods as they do not keep them overnight, or you can head to the local markets to shop for foodstuff," adds Chew.

## Wise words

If you're travelling alone, aside from costs, here are some other points to note:

**"Don't carry too much cash; use a credit card or traveller's cheques. Put your money in different places. Don't put it all in one pocket. For men, never put your money in your back trouser pocket,"** says Christina T Chew, executive director of ProHighway Travel Sdn Bhd. **"Ladies, carry a handbag with the strap slung across your chest and right shoulder; while the bag rests on your left hip."**

**Don't wear or carry expensive jewellery or branded goods; you'd be making yourself a target for pickpockets.**

**Get travel insurance as accidents or hospital charges can be very costly overseas.**

**Bring a map and torchlight in case you arrive late and there's no available public transport or help,** says traveller Seah Lu Sean.

**Enjoy the journey,** adds Seah. "I find that other travellers and also the locals are friendlier if they see that you are travelling alone. It's much easier to share transport, join a group or get help as a solo traveller."

### Use reward points or frequent flyer miles

Getting the best deals when travelling solo doesn't necessarily mean doing it on a shoestring. Here's where all the air miles, credit card reward points and hospitality reward programmes come in. Nor Hayati Yahaya, a 30-something lawyer who holidays alone at least twice a year, uses frequent flyer miles chalked up over the years to get the best deals. "I don't go for airfare deals or pick up flights at travel fairs. You cannot get cheap business-

class flight tickets during travel fairs. Instead, I check with the frequent-flyer programmes on promotion for flight upgrades. For long distance destinations, I buy the cheapest economy tickets — the ones that still qualify for frequent flyer points — and upgrade to business class using the air miles," she says. She admits that while this does involve many air miles, she supplements any shortfall by transferring reward points earned from credit card usage.

In the same vein, Nor Hayati, who's holidayed in the US, Europe, Japan, New Zealand and Australia, also makes full use of reward points earned as a member of various hospitality programmes. "First, I would check with the programmes' websites to see if I have enough points. I would pick hotels where I can use points to redeem free nights. Single or twin sharing is not an issue for me because the rooms would be free anyway. For example, during my three-night stay in Prague recently, I had enough points for two nights' complimentary stay and paid 250 euro (RM1,250) for the third night. Although the one-night stay was expensive, even by my standards, I didn't mind paying because whatever I spent would be credited to my point accumulation for future stays with that hotel chain," she says, adding that the 40,000 points collected would enable her to stay three or four nights for free in many hotels in Asia. "Another way of looking at it is by averaging the amount paid over the three nights; which works out to about RM416 a night. One night in five-star hotels in KL would cost you more than that," she points out.

Thanks to Nor Hayati's shrewd planning, her trip to Cambodia cost her almost nothing. "I redeemed free flights from my air miles and the entire three nights at the Le Meridien were paid for with reward points." ■