

35 top travel tips from the experts for a stress free holiday



Las Teresitas Beach, Tenerife

Pol O'Conghaile – 09 October 2013

BUSY airports and dodgy accommodation are just some of the hassles we've all experienced... but simple tips can make your journey run a lot smoother.

Want to travel faster, cheaper and smarter? I've consulted the experts to bring you tips and shortcuts for saving money and making life on the road that little bit easier.

1. Book early

It sounds logical, but you'd be surprised how many holidaymakers hold off in the hope of rare last-minute discounts. "Booking well ahead does two things," says Stephen McKenna of gohop.ie. "You book at a price you can budget for and you get to look forward to the trip."

January is a good month for early- booking discounts, low deposits and offers such as free child or grandparent places. But why wait? Right now, CaminoWays.com is offering 10pc discounts for 2014 bookings.

2. Hailing Hailo overseas

We all know Hailo, the taxi app. Thanks to the yellow branding on cabs in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick, thousands of iPhone and Android users have been able to summon local chariots with a couple of taps. But does it work overseas? It does. Once you download it and register (and presuming you're on Wi-Fi or data roaming), you can get a cab in London, Toronto, Boston, Chicago, Madrid, New York and Barcelona. Indeed, a Hailo hail is accepted every four seconds around the world. Hailocab.com.

3. Click and collect shopping

You don't have to cram airport shopping into the hour between security and take-off. The Loop, at Dublin and Cork Airports, offers a click and collect service, whereby you can buy online and collect items in person. While you won't find the same savings as the glory days of duty free, the beauty of this shopping option is that you can collect goods on your return, so you don't have to mess with baggage allowances on the way out. The service is only available to shoppers travelling within the EU, however. See theloop.ie.

4. Crash on a couch

Twenty years ago, the idea of travelling to another city and crashing on a stranger's couch would have horrified all but the most independent travellers. Today, it's another story. Sign up with San Francisco-based couchsurfing.org, establish a profile, send requests and proceed to sleep for free in more than 100,000 cities worldwide. "You have friends all over the world," as the site puts it. "You just haven't met them yet."

5. Pack Like a pro

Packing is a knack savvy travellers need to have down -- not just to stay light and nimble, but to avoid baggage charges and delays with lost luggage.

Start by making a list. Do this when you return from a trip, rather than before you set off, when you can see what you did and didn't need. Lists are anal, sure, but they'll stop you bringing the third pair of shoes that ends up costing €15 at every airport.

Next, check the weather forecast for your destination. Save space by rolling rather than folding clothes. Pack large items at the bottom of your case, fragile items in the middle and use T-shirts to divide it up. A plastic bag is good for dirty shoes or clothes.

"I can personally pack for three weeks to include a down jacket, all my horse-riding gear and leisure wear in one small bag," says Zara Stassin of Zara's Planet. Doing laundry on the road is another tip. You won't get it right first time, but practice makes perfect.

6. Gate Guru

"Travel. Reinvented". If only that were true. The tagline for this free app (from the good folk who brought you TripAdvisor) isn't entirely wishful thinking, however. Pitched as a door-to-door travel solution, it not only displays journey details (flight numbers, times, terminals and so on), but keeps an eye on delays, queues and gate changes on the way. The fun part is its travel stats, which allow you to track air miles and countries you have visited, making you feel like George Clooney in 'Up in The Air'. Gateguru.com.

7. Airport genie

Fresh out of the lamp at Dublin Airport, Airport Genie allows passengers to buy services upgrading their experience. Just €5.95 lets you in the fast-track boarding pass channel, for example (with free coffee to boot). And €19.95 adds executive lounge access.

If you're travelling with a family, attendants can be booked to assist with security, shopping, luggage and progress to the gate for €50. [Airport genie.com](http://airportgenie.com)

8. Go to the source

Sites such as Hotels.com and Booking.com offer the best rates, but savvy travellers know to look for the best value on hotel websites. After rounding up a few options on the big sites, click through to the special offers sections on the hotels' sites. The bottom line may not be cheaper, but you'll be surprised at the dinners, activities and treatments bundled up in the deals. A quick phone call can reduce costs even further.

9. Travel Insurance Tips

Insurance is essential, but costs can vary, depending on how you buy it. It's tempting to opt in on insurance when booking with Ryanair or Aer Lingus, for example. But paying €10 per trip makes no sense when annual multi-trip policies are available from under €50. Take some time over the small print, looking for clauses on excesses, pre-existing medical conditions and extras such as winter sports, in particular.

10. European Health insurance card

It's free and it allows free healthcare in any EU or EEA country. So you've got one? Sadly, many don't. The EHIC (formerly known as the E111) is issued by the HSE, and entitles the holder to access public health care services (private care is not covered). It won't cover the full cost of healthcare or repatriation, extra travel or accommodation costs, however. Anyone ordinarily resident in Ireland can apply and you'll need one card per family member. [Hse.ie](http://hse.ie)

11. Keep your passport in date

Yes, it's obvious. But seeing as this is the most important document in your bag, it's worth making sure it's in date. Letting it expire is easy to do (particularly since we no longer refer to them when booking flights), and it's not just the expiry date that's relevant either.

Destinations including Dubai, Thailand and Israel won't allow you to enter without passports valid for at least six months from the date of entry. An Post's Passport Express is the cheapest option, at €80 for adults, plus a processing cost of €9. [Anpost.ie](http://anpost.ie)

12 Skyscanner

Skyscanner is one of most popular flight search tools online, allowing users to trawl hundreds of airlines and millions of routes for cheap flights. It's available for iPhone and Android and is free to download. The app allows users to search flights by date, price and number of stopovers, publishing results in an idiot-proof display. From there, you can book by phone or online. Kayak is a similar service. Skyscanner.ie

13. ITAA Deals of the week

The death of the travel agent has been greatly exaggerated. Every Thursday, the Irish Travel Agents' Association publishes a selection of special offers from its members, and you'd be surprised at the variety. Going to press, Will Walsh of TravelBroker.ie had four nights in Reykjavik, including flights and a tour guide, for just €479pp. Itaa.ie

14. Holidaysonline.ie

Still checking a gazillion websites for your package holiday? Holidaysonline.ie searches several tour operators on a single site. Although run by Sunway, holidays by Budget Travel, Falcon, JWT, Panorama, Crystal, Topflight and more are available, with flight departures from Dublin, Cork, Shannon, Knock, Derry and Belfast. Holidaysonline.ie

15. Great Little places

"I know this great little place." It's a phrase that never fails to draw interest and it's becoming a Facebook phenomenon, too. Great Little Places is a crowd-funded series of guides highlighting hidden gems in London, Amsterdam, Aarhus, and many other cities. "It's a crowd-powered collection of nothing but the world's great little places," they say. "We think dull chains are rubbish, so this is our shout-out for the little guy." Greatlittleplace.com

16. Smart airport parking

In an ideal world, airport parking would be free. For the time being, we'll take cheap. While it's always an option to simply pitch up with your car and pay as you go at Cork and Dublin, savvy travellers know that the cheapest rates are always available online. Long-term car parking is available at Dublin Airport (dublinairportcarparking.ie) from €4.95 per day, for example, with regular promotions on Twitter and Facebook reducing that even further. Another option, which also searches nearby hotels and park-and-rides, is looking4parking.com

17. Take to the skies with Leinster

How can travelling sports fans get close to the players? Booking with your team's official travel operator can pay dividends. In Leinster's case that's Joe Walsh Tours, which currently has Rabo Direct Pro 12 packages, including the Edinburgh away game, on December 1 from €144pp plus tax. Packages include flights on the official Leinster Rugby aircraft with the team, returning directly after the game. Joewalshstours.ie.

18. Skip Museum queues

On a trip to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, I walked straight past a long queue of hot and thirsty tourists and was standing in front of Rembrandt's 'The Night Watch' minutes later. How? By booking my ticket online. Queues for flagship attractions such as this, the Louvre or the Musee d'Orsay are worst at weekends between 11am and 3pm, so by booking tickets online you not only avoid hours of waiting, but control your costs, too.

Museums can be expensive, but many offer limited periods when they charge nothing. New York's MoMA (moma.org) charges a whopping \$25 per adult, for example, but if you visit on

Friday afternoons (4pm-8pm), it's free. Closer to home, the Little Museum of Dublin (littlemuseum.ie) has free entry on Wednesdays from 12-5pm and Thursday nights from 6-8pm. OPW heritage sites are free on the first Wednesday of each month.

19. Get on the phone

The ease and speed of online booking means fewer and fewer of us are speaking to human beings when making holiday decisions. This isn't a problem with short-haul travel, but it can be a disaster when booking complex trips such as safaris and honeymoons. Pick up the phone and tap into the expertise of travel agents (When is rainy season? Do I need vaccinations? Why is that cruise suspiciously cheap?). You'll not only make a more informed decision, but your holiday will be safe and secure with a licensed agent, too.

Data charges can add up crazily overseas, so anyone using their smartphone for roaming needs to make sure they're on the cheapest rate. Vodafone's RED offers 100mb per day for €3.99, which should be enough for most users (though it's still best to keep video and music streaming for WiFi). I like that it sends an alert when you've used 50-80pc of your daily allowance. You can also choose to cut off when you reach the spend cap.

20. The Man in Seat 61

When it comes to rail travel, this is the best site around, no question. Mark Smith is a railway nerd who shares his passion for travel in depth and detail online, not only evoking the routes, but detailing the best ways to book them and virtually everything else you need to know along the way. The result is a comprehensive website that regularly features on lists of the best travel sites worldwide. Seat61.com.

21. Tap local knowledge

This goes way beyond TripAdvisor. Many of us already canvas recommendations on Twitter and Facebook before we travel, but by doing a quick trawl of sites such as Spottedbylocals.com and Yelp (most of the content is written by locals and the 'talk' feature allows you to tap into local advice). There's also start-ups such as LikeWhere.com, which has recommendations based on city neighbourhoods you already know you like. It's the 21st Century way of travelling, baby. Get connected and you'll be living like a local before you get off the plane.

22. Top secret hotels

It's a special offer straight out of the 007 school of travel. Lastminute.com gives 35pc off a range of hotels, the only catch being that the name is only revealed once you commit to book. Choose a date, pick an area and make your choice (the location, star rating and description is provided). Lastminute.ie

23. DFA Travel Advice

Is it safe to travel to Egypt? What areas should I avoid on safari in Kenya? The Department of Foreign Affairs' travel advisory service isn't the sexiest website, but it's reliable when it comes to safety issues for people travelling overseas. Security alerts, health advice and

contact details for Irish embassies and consulates are provided for practically every country on earth -- and, crucially, it's kept up to date. Dfa.ie

24. Check the weather

Frequent travellers love comparing weather apps, bashing old models that show sunny pictures as it rains outside, and hailing new updates and arrivals as the best thing since... well, weather apps. AccuWeather always gets a nod, but an alternative I've found very useful is Yr.no. It pulls millions of forecasts from the Norwegian Meteorological Institute and provides outlook, temperatures, rainfall and wind data for even obscure destinations. This is still weather we're talking about, however, so no guarantees.

25. Power up

Smartphones are super -- until the battery dies. This may not be a major issue for city breaks or package holidays, when sockets are close to hand, but for adventure travel, festivals, camping and safari, it can be a real bugbear. One solution is the Power Monkey Extreme (€143), which is water and shock resistant and provides up to four iPhone charges, along with the added benefit of a solar panel for recharging. Powertraveller.com

26. How to blag an upgrade

There's no sure-fire way to achieve an upgrade (if there was, we'd all be flying first class), but there are several ways to give yourself the best possible chance.

For hotels, join the house loyalty scheme before you book and travel at a quiet time of the week (and season). At check-in, dress well and ask politely but confidently for an upgrade. Couples have been known to add an extra flourish by perhaps mentioning an anniversary. After that, it's in the hands of the gods (or at least, the receptionists).

With airlines, preference is also given to members of loyalty schemes, so sign up before you fly. Ask once at the check-in desk and once only (check-in staff decide where you sit, and that can work both ways). As a last resort, ask how much an upgrade might cost. If there are seats available, they will invariably be cheaper than the advertised price.

27. Google maps

Before your holiday, you can create your own map of a city, pinpoint your favourite recommendations and plot out trails. On the ground, you can access that map, get directions by foot, bike, car or public transport and add new finds along the way. Afterwards, you can share discoveries with friends. It gobbles data and battery, mind you, so make sure your roaming is sorted.

28. Get your visa in advance

After queuing at check-in, security and for the plane, the last thing anyone wants to join is yet another queue to purchase a visa. Depending on the country, this is one queue you can avoid. Few holidaymakers realise you need a visa to enter Turkey, for instance, but you can skip awkward waits by ordering online in the new e-visa system (evisa.gov.tr). Buy it in advance, print it out, present it to officials on arrival and away you go.

29. Know your rights

Despite major disruptions such as the Icelandic ash crisis and the severe winters of 2009/10, many passengers remain unsure of their rights in the event of cancellations, delays, denied boarding or downgrading. Flightright.ie is a consumer website run by the Aviation Regulator. It details air passenger rights in a non-intimidating way, answers common questions and even provides a facility to file a complaint online. Perfect browsing if your flight is delayed.

30. What's the cheapest day to fly?

Tuesdays and Wednesdays are popularly seen as both the cheapest days to travel and the cheapest to book flights. Since most holidaymakers fly on Thursdays and Fridays, and return on Sundays, airlines tend to jack up their fares at weekends. However, a recent study conducted at Texas A&M University suggests that Saturday mornings may be worth a look, too. That's when bookings held by business travellers on Friday nights are released.

31. When NOT to book your flight

Studies differ on the best advance booking period for flights and in truth, there's no cast-iron guarantee. Around 21 to 11 days before you fly is one suggested window, in many cases throwing up cheaper fares than bookings made months ahead. What we do know for certain, however, is that leaving it to the last minute is the absolute worst thing that you can do.

32. Travel supermarkets

Think holidays and Lidl and Supervalu aren't the first places that come to mind. Both are winning business with clever approaches to travel, however. Supervalu's Getaway Breaks, for example, has luxury spa breaks from €94.50pp plus 250 points.

Meanwhile, Lidl offers short breaks in Ireland, starting with B&B deals from €39pp. You may sneer, but it's hard to argue with the savings. Supervalu.ie; Lidl-breaks.ie

33. Airbnb

With hotel prices on the rise again, the option of crashing at a flat for a night, a house for a week or villa for a month is pretty damned attractive. That's the business model behind Airbnb, at any rate, an online service connecting users to unique accommodation in 33,000 cities. It's not just standard bricks and mortar either -- tree houses, boats, yurts and caravans feature at every price point. A Battle Royale with (highly regulated) hotels and B&Bs surely looms, but for the moment, it's flying. Just don't expect room service. Airbnb.ie

34. The Ryanair Cheat Sheet

Ryanair a caring airline? Who would have thought it? Yet here we are, watching a carrier that considered charging passengers to pee, opening a Twitter account, accepting American Express credit cards and removing its annoying Captcha (from October 31).

Some things haven't changed, however. Baggage and ancillary charges will be around for years to come, though there are ways of minimising the stress they cause.

1. Make sure to opt out of insurance and other extras at the booking stage.
2. Pack light. Michael O'Leary wants hold baggage at a minimum, and in order to avoid baggage charges, you have to play by his rules. Suck it up.
3. Fit everything into one bag. Otherwise, you pay extra. Simple.
4. Bring your own snacks.
5. Chill out. Airports are full of people complaining about Ryanair queues. But all of them have bought Ryanair tickets. If you want a different experience, fly with a different airline.

35. GET LOST

With all of the user reviews and Facebook recommendations at our disposal, modern holidays can be strangely scheduled affairs. Friends' finds, Yelp reviews and tweeted tips can dominate our decisions at the expense of one of the great joys to travel -- getting lost.

By all means, take advice. But don't forget to follow your nose because you never know what you might find.