

Hiking the National Parks on a Budget

by Lydia Tan, March 10, 2017

Backpack: check. Water bottle: check. Sleeping bag: check. Compass: check. You're ready to hike your first national park. Whether you're heading to the relatively easy Bridalveil Fall trail in Yosemite or the spectacularly difficult Paintbrush Canyon Loop at Grand Teton National Park, you're ready for any challenge the trail may throw at you. You've spent your money on the best equipment you can afford, but did you remember to account for all the other expenses involved in getting TO and FROM the park?

For many hikers, an airplane trip is required to get to your ultimate destination. So be sure to make your airline reservation well in advance, which will help you get the best possible airfare. Use online airfare trackers to keep track of fares, and book when you think the airfare is the lowest it will go. While most experts suggest that you do not wait until the last minute to book your flight, some people do find that they can get great deals on last-minute seats. However, this is a risky proposition, because there's no guarantee that you'll get the seat you want on the flight you need.

Most hikers need to spend at least two nights in a hotel, at either end of the trip. And, of course, if you choose not to camp overnight, you'll have the expense of a hotel every night of your trip. Book your room early, because the national parks are major tourist destinations, and it can be difficult to get a room. Many hotels know that travelers to the national parks have few hotel choices, so they charge a premium fee. Try looking for hotels that will lodge you for a reasonable rate and then provide transportation to and from the park each day.

If you're not an experienced hiker, you might consider buying a package deal from a tour operator. While these packages can be pricey, they save you a lot of time and energy. The tour company makes your flight arrangements, provides lodging and transportation, and even offers experienced trail guides to bring you to little-known parts of the park. Many of these tour companies offer lower prices just before the start of, or just after the end of, the prime hiking season. If you're willing to be flexible in your plans, you can save a bundle.

It is possible to go hiking in the national parks on a budget, but you need to be flexible as well as creative!