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10 Frugal Summer Vacation Ideas for People Who Don't Fly

by **Holly Johnson**

The summer travel season can be a letdown if you don't like to fly. While your friends are packing their bags and jetting off to amazing locations abroad or across the country, you're stuck at home wishing you could snap your fingers and magically land on some tropical beach.

But, you don't have to stay home and watch Netflix all summer if you refuse to get on an airplane. There are many beautiful sights and cities here in the U.S., and plenty of ways to reach them without walking through body scanners and hurtling through the atmosphere.

If you want to get out of your geographic area and see another part of the country, **Amtrak has an entire page dedicated to deals**. Since train travel is fairly cheap and can offer beautiful views of the countryside along the way — that you can actually sit back and enjoy while someone else does the driving — it can perform double-duty as both a mode of transportation and a fun part of your journey.

Feel like a road trip? Gas prices are predicted to be **at their cheapest levels in 12 years** this summer, so why not pack up the family car and hit the road, **Griswold style**? If you don't have a car or don't want to subject it to a cross-country trek, you can consider renting a car with unlimited miles — or even an RV — and plotting a course to some must-see sights. With a loaded trunk and the kids in the back, you can enjoy the scenery and some family fun as you drive to your destination — and, best of all, you won't have to pay for airfare or rent a car when you get there.

Summer Vacation Ideas for People Who Don't Fly

Whether you decide to take a train, car, or even a boat, here are some frugal attractions to consider in every corner of the country.

Visit a national park

To celebrate the 100th birthday of the National Park Service, you can gain free entry into any national park April 16-24, 2016. But even after this week, you can easily turn a national park visit into a frugal vacation or weekend getaway.

Use FindYourPark.com to search for national parks and local accommodations, whether it's in your immediate area or on the other side of the country. From Rocky Mountain National Park and Yosemite in the West, to Great Smoky Mountains or Dry Tortugas in the South, to Acadia in the Northeast, National Parks offer landscapes to please nearly everyone, nearly anywhere in the country.

While the cheap campsites inside these parks fill up fast, much of the time, and depending on the park, you can find affordable lodging nearby. Think a rustic cabin, a family-friendly motel, or a historic bed and breakfast right next to one of America's natural wonders – some of the most scenic places on earth.

Go camping (or even glamping)

Whether you're visiting a local campground or a state or national park, camping is always a frugal option – and summer's the perfect time to do it. If you don't have the right equipment on hand — tent, sleeping bags, cooler — see if you can borrow gear from a family member or friend. And even if you have to buy a tent, it's still bound to be cheaper than airfare or paying for a pricey hotel.

If you don't like roughing it, you can also try "glamping" – a form of camping that lets you enjoy the outdoors, but with some of the comforts offered by hotels and resorts. Luxury camping company **Under Canvas** offers a few glamping resorts at National Parks across the U.S. While you're still technically "camping," these resorts offer access to real beds and an on-site staff.

- **Related: [A Basic Guide to an Inexpensive and Incredibly Fun Family Camping Vacation](#)**

Visit a regional theme park or water park

While Disney World may call itself the "happiest place on Earth," there are more reasonably-priced theme parks and water parks within driving distance of just about anyone in the United States.

In the state of Indiana, for example, you've got **Holiday World Theme Park & Splashin' Safari** – a great theme park destination for the entire family. Not only do they offer free soft drinks and sunscreen, but they have one of the best water parks in the entire Midwest, and there are plenty of affordable places to stay nearby. **Lake Rudolph Campground**, for example, adjacent to the park, offers inexpensive rentals on everything from campsites to cabins and even rental RVs.

Next door in Ohio, you'll find the family-friendly King's Island as well as the iconic Cedar Point, which is often considered the "Roller Coaster Capital of the World."

Six Flags theme parks are a touch pricey, but certainly cheaper than a trip to Disney, and they're all over the country – including locations in California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Texas.

If you have kids in tow, you can also consider a road trip to the **Wisconsin Dells**, a theme and water park haven in the middle of Wisconsin. There, you'll find extremely affordable lodging options in addition to world class parks and attractions.

- **Related: [A Look at Our Inexpensive Vacation in Wisconsin](#)**

Go ‘shelling’ in southern Florida

If you love the beauty of shells and enjoy scouring the beach for some treasures of your own, a trip to Southern Florida may be in order. Dubbed the “shelling capitals of the world,” Sanibel and Captiva Islands have long been known as ideal destinations for shell collectors and enthusiasts.

According to information provided by the **Beaches of Fort Myers & Sanibel**, the area’s geography and east to west orientation of the water puts it in the perfect position to catch shells of all shapes, varieties and colors. Since many shells arrive fully intact, you can save money by scouring the beach for your very own souvenirs.

After gathering your own share of shells, you can also visit the **Bailey Matthews National Shell Museum**, the only museum in the U.S. dedicated to shells and mollusks.

If you need a rental car, **Hotwire.com** offers car rental options for as little as \$11.95 per day. Pick up an affordable rental on your way to southern Florida, then shell your day away without a care in the world.

Athens, Ga.

The college town of Athens, Ga., is known for its music scene, and it’s no wonder — this is where R.E.M., the B-52s, the Indigo Girls, Widespread Panic, and many other bands across every genre got their start. However, that’s not all this eclectic and diverse city has to offer. From wildly inexpensive food and hotels to award-winning bars and nightlife, Athens offers a nocturnal culture of its own. Visitors to Athens can also go to the State Botanical Garden of Georgia and the Georgia Museum of Art for free, making Athens a great stop for a family trip, too.



The college town of Athens, Ga. has a great music and dining scene that won't break the bank. Photo: Georgia DCA

Southern California

Home to five of **America's top 25 beaches**, including La Jolla Shores, Coronado, and Carlsbad, the eternally sunny stretch between Los Angeles and San Diego makes for a perfect getaway — and a fairly cheap one, if you avoid staying in LA or its pricier suburbs.

After all, whether you enjoy swimming, surfing, reading, or just building sand castles, the beach itself can provide hours of free entertainment and relaxation for the whole family. So let one of these beautiful sandy stretches be the focal point of your vacation, instead of the expensive tourist traps of Hollywood. (Bonus: Amtrak's scenic **Surfliner route** services this area.)

Lodging options in seaside cities like Oceanside, Encinitas, or Costa Mesa, Calif., can be fairly inexpensive even near the water. And Costa Mesa, next to Newport Beach, is also running a promotion that could make your summer getaway free this year. The sweepstakes will run from April 1 to May 15, 2016 and the winner will be chosen on May 30, 2016 (you can fill out the entry form [here](#)). Winners will receive two nights at Ayres Hotel & Suites, a pair of passes to Disneyland, and a \$1,000 American Express gift card, among other prizes.

Discount cruises

While flying is the most obvious way to get out of the country, you can also cruise away from the coast – no plane required.

“One of the most frugal ways to travel this summer for people who don’t like to fly is to embark on a dream cruise with Carnival Cruise Lines,” says John Drabkowski, founder and CEO of **Red Hot Cruises**. Their 24 ships “feature musical performances, casinos, comfortable stateroom accommodations, and delicious food and drink,” he adds.

And if you think you don’t live near a cruise port, think again. Carnival cruises depart from cities like Galveston, Texas, Long Beach, Calif., Mobile, Ala., Norfolk, Va., Seattle, Baltimore, and Charleston, S.C., as well as bigger and more obvious ports such as Honolulu, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, and many cities in Florida, making cruising a viable option for people who live nearly anywhere in the country.

Lake Chelan, Wash.

While Seattle is known for its dreary and rainy weather, **Lake Chelan**, which is just three hours east, boasts more than 300+ days per year of sun. Because of its location, Lake Chelan is also an easy “one-tank getaway” for much of the Pacific Northwest.

Lake Chelan is home to more than bright and sunny weather, however; the area has 24 separate wineries, water activities including water skiing, jet skiing, and boating, and plenty of mountains and valleys perfect for hiking and sightseeing. Meanwhile, local businesses offer an array of activities for sports junkies, including zip lining, skydiving, and paragliding.

Lake Chelan’s **website** offers a list of hotels, resorts, and campgrounds if you need a place to stay nearby – and some of the options are downright cheap. Rooms at the local Midtowner Motel, for example, start at just \$92 per night during peak summer season, and \$62 for late summer and early fall.

Jekyll Island, Ga.

If you live anywhere in the south or the lower Midwest, you're probably within driving distance of the beautiful Jekyll Island on Georgia's southern coast. Thanks to the many bike trails, miles of beaches, historical buildings and landmarks, and wildlife, you'll never run out of free things to do here.

In addition to some top-notch resorts, Jekyll Island also boasts its own 18-acre campground where you can park an RV or pitch a tent under the stars. If you want to stay in a hotel but keep it on the cheaper side, Jekyll Island is also home to a Holiday Inn Resort and a Hampton Inn & Suites.

'Mayberry'

If you're looking for a quintessential American getaway, look no further than Mount Airy, N.C. The hometown of Andy Griffith and known as the inspiration behind Mayberry on the "Andy Griffith Show," Mount Airy offers a bundle of perks and activities for families looking to enjoy quality time on the cheap.

Attractions include the Mayberry Courthouse, a history museum, the Andy Griffith Museum, and an iconic downtown. Plus, you can enjoy 15 local wineries, three state parks within a 30-minute drive, and so many affordable dining options you won't be able to choose.

The Bottom Line

When you want to have good, clean family fun, you don't have to go somewhere far-flung. The United States is home to a wealth of sights and attractions you just can't find anywhere else – and there's bound to be one or more you can reach by car or train.

All of the beauty, wonder, and fun you can imagine is just a train, car, or boat ride away.

What are your favorite attractions in the United States? Do you have anything else to add to this list?