

FARMLIVING

FARMING TOGETHER

A Rosthern, Sask., farm has a long history of generations working together to produce cattle and grain. | **Page 22**



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BUDGET VACATION

Low dollar doesn't have to mean staying home this winter

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Canadians planning a winter vacation are likely learning that the fastest thing heading south is the Canadian dollar. However, it is possible to travel well internationally without breaking the bank by taking time to research the options.

We've been through this before when, 15 years ago, the loonie was even lower. The big difference now is that there are so many more online resources to draw upon to find the best deals.

Ours is not the only plunging currency. The Mexican peso has also been hammered by low oil prices, so the loonie doesn't look too bad there.

Other countries dependent on resource exports have had recent currency devaluations, such as Australia, Chile and South Africa.

In some parts of the world, the Canadian dollar is still doing reasonably well. While the loonie has fallen against the euro, the decrease is a lot less than against the U.S. dollar.

Even in countries that have their own currency, some tourist services might be priced in U.S. dollars. Fortunately this doesn't happen everywhere.

Take the example of African wildlife safaris. Trips in East Africa are almost always priced in U.S. dollars.

In South Africa, anything booked locally is usually priced in South African rand, which has decreased in value even more than

the Canadian dollar in recent years.

Places in the U.S. that rely on Canadian visitors, such as parts of Florida, are well aware of the low loonie and are starting to respond with special discounts for Canadians.

Search for these on state tourism websites.

Many parts of the world are simply less costly, regardless of the currency. In parts of Southeast Asia, comfortable small hotels and guesthouses for less than \$50 are common and you can often get a decent meal for little more than \$5.

On our recent trip to Bolivia, the most we paid for a hotel room (a fairly nice one) was US\$43, including breakfast. If you're wondering where the deals are, visit the Price of Travel website, which compares costs of travelling in various countries and ranks the ones where your money goes the farthest.

The best way to save on airfare is to be flexible on dates. It's surprising how much fares vary, even from one day to the next.

Flexibility is key when looking for last minute deals on hotels and flights

We usually start with a search on Matrix ITA software because it displays fares for every day over a month, and for different lengths of trips.

Operated by Google, ITA is strictly for searching fares so you can't make bookings there. Once you find the best deal, go to the airline, a booking site or take the information to a travel agent.

Depending on where you're headed, it might be cheaper to fly into a major hub where there are more competing airlines and lower fares, then take a regional flight to your destination.

This is especially the case in Europe and Asia, which have low-cost local airlines. When planning our trip to Cambodia and Laos last winter, it was significantly cheaper to fly into nearby Bangkok, Thailand (a major hub for Southeast Asia), then take regional flights from there.

If you can travel on short notice, watch for last minute deals from charter operators, both

for airfare and air/hotel packages. Look up which charter flights operate from your airport, then monitor their websites for last minute deals.

If you're flexible as to where to go, have a look at Kayak Explore. Enter the name of your airport and it will display the lowest fares (including taxes) to various parts of the world. Sometimes there are pleasant surprises.

An effective way to control travel costs is to go local, focusing on small hotels, guest houses and local tour operators.

Besides potential cost savings, there's more opportunity to meet local people, which is one reason we travel in the first place.

Whether you're staying in a small guesthouse in Asia or a B and B in your own province, your money goes directly to those providing the service rather than to an international hotel chain.

This approach takes more planning because you have to sort the good from the bad. Researching guidebooks helps, but for more current information, go to online discussion forums on travel, the big one being Trip Advisor, which has forums on practically every country in the world where ordinary travellers ask and answer questions.

Another forum we use is Thorn Tree, operated by Lonely Planet guidebooks.

Accommodation and tour operators are common topics, and if you don't find what you're looking for, you can post a question. When you find a hotel that looks promising, search for reviews.

Since anyone can post reviews, take them with a grain of salt. Some people are chronic complainers, while an overly glowing review might be coming from the hotel owner's buddy. But if comments from different people are generally positive or negative, there's probably something to it. It's getting harder for anyone in the travel industry to get away with shoddy service without it showing up on Trip Advisor.

Since we've been making more use of travel forums, they have helped us save money and we've been happier with our choices for accommodation and other services.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



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- 2015 Delegate, Jamie Y., Regina, SK

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