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At resorts around the Dominican Republic, discounts are the norm this summer. Club Med Punta Cana is offering 50% off the second person on stays of three nights or longer.

By B. Van Looke, Club Med

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Top five bargain destinations for summer 2009

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What's this?



[Enlarge](#) National Park Service

If you're within driving distance, on a budget, and enjoy the outdoors, a national park can be an ideal summer bargain destination. At Yellowstone, the entrance fee is just \$25.

Recession, the swine flu, and airline capacity cuts: On the one hand, it seems like the odds are stacked against travelers. On the other, there are a lot of great travel deals and a whole world out there. So if you're looking for bargain travel this summer, you're in luck. In fact, I found so many good deals that, in addition to the top five, I added a roundup of more destinations that should be on the radar of anyone looking for an affordable vacation.

I've monitored trends, industry news, and sale patterns to point you in the direction of places that offer the best bargain value for the coming season. Below you'll find examples of deals presently available for summer trips. Like all deals, these are sure to expire; however, a little research on your part can yield similar results when you're ready to book.

Los Angeles

The winning combination of new air service, solid deals, and fewer visitors make the greater Los Angeles area a bargain hotspot this summer. L.A. airports have seen a drop in passenger traffic this year, but airlines are still adding new service, which means more choice and less competition for travelers. Need more convincing? The [American Society of Travel Agents](#) (ASTA) just named Los Angeles a top budget-friendly destination. And, Disneyland is offering [free admission](#) to visitors on their birthday.

So about those new routes. Virgin America just started service between San Francisco and John Wayne Airport in Orange County. Meanwhile, Delta has expanded service between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. There are so many sales on domestic air travel this summer, it's hard to keep track of them all. AirTran (book by May 12), Alaska (book by May 14), Delta (book by May 18), Southwest (book by May 14), United (book by May 14), and Virgin America all have flights on sale to Los Angeles airports. No matter when you book, you can always check the [latest domestic airfare deals](#) for your dates.

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On the ground, there are more ways to save. Santa Monica has a [Sun, Sea, Save](#) promotion that offers travelers a third night free and a variety of free attraction passes when booking at participating Santa Monica hotels. The Los

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Angeles Convention and Visitors Bureau lists current [L.A. discounts](#) on restaurants, tours, and more. And, Disneyland deals are available [directly through the park](#) or via providers such as [Expedia](#) and [JetBlue](#).

Dominican Republic

With this many deals and discounts, the Dominican Republic could convincingly rename itself the Deals Republic this summer. But deals aren't the only reason to consider the DR: Two low-cost airlines are starting new service to the island, and industry publication Travel Weekly named the Dominican Republic the number one Caribbean destination late last year, a testament to its broad travel appeal. However, bear in mind that summer is hurricane season, so if you do plan a Caribbean vacation, be sure to get trip insurance and consider traveling outside of the late August and early September peak storm season.

New service from low-cost carriers puts the Dominican Republic within reach for more travelers. Starting on June 18, Spirit will begin service between Ft. Lauderdale and Santiago, and on June 19, JetBlue kicks off service between Boston and Santo Domingo.

Options abound on the vacation package front. [CheapCaribbean.com](#) is offering discounted air-and-hotel packages such as four-nights and airfare from \$560 per person (at press time, this deal was set to expire on May 11, but may be extended or replaced by a similar offer). [JetBlue](#) had an air-and-three-night package at the Riu Mambo all-inclusive resort in Puerto Plata for \$405 per person. These are just a few of the vacation deals you should be able to find to the Dominican Republic this summer from online travel agencies and airlines.

At resorts around the island, discounts are the norm this summer. Club Med Punta Cana is offering [50% off](#) the second person on stays of three nights or longer, or [free stays](#) for kids 15 and younger for seven-night stays. The [Excellence Punta Cana Resort](#) has 15 to 25% off summer rates, and the [Puntacana Hotel](#) has 40% off rates to celebrate its 40th anniversary.

National Parks

If you're within driving distance, on a budget, and enjoy the outdoors, a national park (or state or regional park) can be an ideal summer bargain destination. Accommodations are as cheap as you'll find them (though you'll have to pack your own bed ... or sleeping bag) and you'll be surrounded by free activities like hiking, bird watching, and swimming. If everything but the sleeping on the ground sounds good, you can forgo the camping in favor of an in- or out-of-park hotel or motel. However, unless you're planning on staying at one of the no-reservations campgrounds in a park, don't wait until the last minute to book your accommodations; this bargain option is one many summer travelers will likely take advantage of this season.

Not sold yet? Here are some numbers that illustrate the sorts of vacation costs you can expect at national parks. At [Yellowstone](#), for example, the entrance fee (good for up to six people) is just \$25. Campsites for up to four people range between \$12 and \$25 per night. And early summer [room rates](#) near the park start at \$59 per night. If you're not within road-trip distance of the park, you might consider flying into Salt Lake City, where you'll be able to take advantage of U.S. summer airfare sales from many major airlines. For more tips, Priceline.com blogger Brian Ek has a detailed and money-saving post on the best way to visit [Yellowstone on a budget](#).

Other parks offer similarly good value. In [Yosemite](#), you'll pay \$20 per car and \$14 to \$20 for a campsite. And at [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#), entrance is free and campsites cost between \$14 and \$23 per night.

Australia

This summer is a particularly good time to save money on an Australia vacation. The U.S. Tour Operators Association (USTOA) is reporting that travel to Australia is 20% cheaper now than it was a year ago. Plus, competitive pricing from airlines and other promotions such as discounted vacation packages and air passes make Australia an intriguing choice for travelers who can spend a little more but are still on a budget this summer.

The flight time from Los Angeles to Sydney is about the same as between L.A. and Rome. And this summer, it may actually be cheaper to fly to Australia than to Europe. A spot-check of flights from San Francisco in July puts a round-trip flight to Sydney at \$763 versus \$1,040 to Rome. Even from the East Coast, Australia flights are competitive with airfare to Europe.

Sale fares and vacation packages bring Australia's affordability into better focus. Qantas is running a sale with round-trip flights between L.A. or San Francisco and Brisbane, Melbourne, or Sydney from about \$620, or from New York starting at \$820. V Australia recently ended a similar deal, and may offer more sale fares to stay competitive. Qantas also has a [four-city Australia air pass](#) from \$999, which allows travelers to visit multiple cities on a single airfare. For \$999, the airline has an [air-and-hotel package](#) with six nights' accommodations as well.

Asheville, North Carolina

Asheville earns top-five status by being an already affordable destination with new low-cost airline service. [AirTran](#) will begin flying between Orlando and Asheville starting June 11, with introductory fares of \$69 one-way. You might also check flights into Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport (about an hour and thirty minutes away) and Charlotte Douglas International Airport (about two hours away) to compare fares if the lowest price is a priority.

In the [Specials and Deals section](#) of ExploreAsheville.com, you'll find savings such as 50-percent off a second night at the Four Points by Sheraton, \$25 per night gas rebate card from the Crowne Plaza, and discounts at museums around town. You can also take advantage of the site's [Asheville budget travel planner](#), with free activity ideas and more savings opportunities. Plus, Asheville is an ideal jumping-off point for a visit to the Blue Ridge Parkway, known as "America's Favorite Drive" and a can't-miss (and free) activity. For more information, the [Asheville Travel Blog](#) offers a current look at events and activities in town.

Bonus destinations

Want more budget destination ideas for travel this summer? How about:

- Virginia: To mark the 40th anniversary of the Virginia is for Lovers promotional campaign, Virginia has launched a [40 Off Travel Deals](#) program. Look for \$40 off, 40% off, or buy three get the fourth free at participating lodgings and attractions around the state.
- Bermuda: In honor of its [400th birthday](#), Bermuda is offering visitors staying four nights or more \$400 back this

summer.

- Scotland: Summer airfare sales and an exchange rate that will save Americans hundreds of dollars compared to years past are just part of the value equation. This year marks [Scotland's Homecoming 2009](#), a year-long collection of festivals celebrating golf, whisky, Robert Burns, and other Scottish cultural cornerstones. Many events are cheap or free.
- Jamaica: Additional Air Jamaica service from Ft Lauderdale, Orlando, and New York make the Caribbean favorite more accessible this summer. Low-season rates at resorts offer extra affordability.
- U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI): The [Sizzlin' Sampler Package](#) includes a free fourth night, \$300 off your vacation, and \$100 in gift certificates for stays through October.
- Branson, Missouri: A [new airport](#) and service from Sun Country and AirTran make this music and leisure destination easier to get to than ever before.

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[TravelGirl12866](#) (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 4d 6h ago

Another site to check for deals is <http://www.besttraveldeals.net/> Best Travel Deals right now they have a 48 hour sale for Atlantis Bahamas The Reef, Free Movie Tickets, \$10 off At Buca di Pep restaurant and a lot more.

I love the site, you can vote for your favorite deals, leave comments or even submit your own best deals.

Happy Travels!

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[stacezilla](#) (8 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 22h ago

I really want to go somewhere....but dont have much money!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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[JimDownSouth](#) (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6d ago

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G-r-e-a-t. And if you die? How about free drinks for a year at the pool-side bar for the grieving

spouse?

[Recommend](#) | [Report Abuse](#)**thelemalove93** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6d ago

Vegas definitely has some hot deals right now. I have seen rooms at TI for \$40 a night and even mandalay bay for \$69 a night. I would recommend signing up for the players club at the hotels you are interested in and then you will see the bargains fly in.

[Recommend](#) | [Report Abuse](#)**VickiinLA** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6d 1h ago

There are a lot of GREAT bargains in Los Angeles! Check out www.discoverLosAngeles.com for more info - many special offers and great articles on FREE things to do in LA!

[Recommend](#) | [Report Abuse](#)**petlover2** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 6d 1h ago

I have looked into Trips to Mexico.(Cancun), SFO, TPA, MCO for Sept time frame. You would think that with the economy and swine flu scare you would find bargains. Not the case, the prices I am seeing are the same ones that have been there every year. I think the economy and flu scares are all marketing ploys for the travel industry. The costs are no lower now then last year!!

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BUT, if you want a great deal, we can give you 3 free nights in Los Cabos Mexico. :)

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