

10 ways to save big on lodging in Orlando

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It was a busy April weekend — the height of spring break — and there was barely a hotel room to be found in all of [Orlando](#), much less one at a bargain price.

So, how could I be staying in a three-bedroom luxury town home — with plasma TVs in every room and a plush clubhouse within walking distance — for a mere \$150 a night? That's easy: I played the game.

If your idea of finding lodging in Orlando is doing a quick search on the Internet, then picking the cheapest option, chances are you're paying way too much.

By virtue of its sheer size (more than 100,000 hotel rooms) and popularity, Orlando is a bargain-hunter's paradise. There's always a deal to be had, but they're not necessarily the deals you typically expect.

You need to think beyond hotels and include time shares and vacation homes in the mix. You need to bypass the usual travel Web sites — Expedia, Travelocity, etc. — and seek more niche-oriented ones. In short, you need to treat the whole search as a challenge.

But I'll make it simpler for you, especially since we're headed into Central Florida's hectic summer tourist season: I've identified 10 ways to save on Orlando lodgings. Most are ones I've used myself. A few come by way of budget-minded travel experts. But they're all nearly foolproof.

Give at least a couple of them a try when you plan your next Orlando vacation. Your wallet will thank you.

Buying a time share

No, I'm not talking about spending more than \$10,000 for a week at one of Orlando's shiny new time shares — there's no savings in that. Rather, I'm talking about buying on the cheap on the resale market — and not necessarily in Orlando. The key here is to purchase a property for little to nothing (I'm talking under \$500 in many instances), so that you can gain access to a time-share exchange system — RCI is the most popular one. Then, you can almost always swap into Orlando, which has plenty of availability precisely because it has so many shiny new time shares (and plenty of older but still not-so-shabby ones).

Of course, you'll still have to pay an annual maintenance fee (not unlike homeowner association dues) to your resort, but again, if you do the research, you'll find one with a relatively low yearly levy.

The best source for understanding time shares and finding out where (and how) to buy them? Without a doubt, it's the Timeshare User's Group's Web site — www.tug2.net.

Potential Savings: Thousands of dollars. Consider this: I bought a time share in South Africa — yes, South Africa — several years ago for around \$500 with annual fees that have stayed under \$500. I have used that to bunk down countless weeks in top-rated Orlando resorts (and when I say "bunk down," I truly mean it — I never settle for less than a two-bedroom unit). Here's a perfect example: This Thanksgiving week —

one of the most in-demand vacation times — I'll be at the Orange Lake Country Club in a three-bedroom luxury-style unit overlooking a golf course. On the open market, it could rent for as much as \$2,500.

Potential Pitfalls: There's definitely an upfront expenditure, although if you play it smart, you can find real deals (another great source for buying time shares is eBay). And there's no saying that RCI won't change the rules at any point — the value of my South African week on the exchange market has already gone down because of RCI's newer policies, though I can still usually find something in Orlando. Another option to consider is simply to buy a resale unit in Orlando — the cost will be a little more, but still way less than buying new from the developer.

Taking a time share tour

Here's another way to use the time-share system to your advantage: Time-share developers sell their units by offering tours (usually, advertised as being less than two hours in length) that come with a variety of perks, from free tickets to theme parks to, yes, low-cost accommodations at the resorts. Package deals can be found for around \$200 that typically feature three nights of lodging, plus tickets to the parks. You can often learn about these deals through the developers themselves - the list includes some of the big hotel chains like Hilton and Marriott - or you can also gain referrals for offers through the Timeshare User's Group (look up "Members Resort Promos").

Potential Savings: Significant. Even if the resort puts you up in a studio unit (or in an outside hotel), you're looking at spending under \$50 a night for lodgings that are worth considerably more.

Potential Pitfalls: Well, you do have to take the tour. And time-share salespeople are not known for taking "No" for an answer (I've been on tours that have lasted more than three hours). Plus, if you're really not interested in buying, you have to ask yourself how fair it is to waste their time. Still, the resort developers are willing to take that chance.

Renting a vacation home

In recent years, Orlando has become a hot spot for buyers of vacation homes (or condo hotels). Most owners of these properties spend relatively little time in them, meaning they hope to recoup at least some of their expenses by renting the units out. And so they do — for as little as \$100 a night (or even less in some instances).

As with time shares, we're talking real accommodations, not some postage-stamp sized [hotel room](#). The offerings range from two-bedroom town homes to seven-bedroom estate homes with private pools. You can find them through many sources — a popular broker is All Star Vacation Homes (www.allstarvacationhomes.com), but I landed my aforementioned \$150-a-night Easter weekend deal through Disney Area Vacation Homes (www.davh.com). You can also find countless listings on the Vacation Rentals By Owner site (www.vrbo.com).

Potential Savings: Do the math: I enjoyed my three-bedroom town home for \$150 a night when decent hotels in the area were charging more than \$200 (for just a room!). And because the accommodations are so large, you can easily go with a group and split the costs.

Potential Pitfalls: This isn't like staying at a hotel — if you've got a problem, there's no front-desk manager to run to. That said, if you go through a broker, you usually have someone to contact immediately if an issue arises. (And if you go through an owner directly, make sure you have their contact info.)

Finding the right Web site

While there are plenty of sites that will give you travel info (I'm partial to TripAdvisor.com) and there are others that can arrange hotel stays (Travelocity, Expedia), there are three Orlando specialists that can really help in terms of saving some dough (and learning about all the city has to offer). I'm talking [MouseSaver.com](#), [WDWinfo.com](#) and [AllEarsNet.com](#). In addition to the tips they provide, they also feature deals on lodgings with site sponsors and affiliates.

Potential Savings: The deals on lodgings are good, though not out of this world. But I really go to the sites for information.

Potential Pitfalls: None, so long as you're the type of person who doesn't mind spending time reading and clicking away to save some bucks.

Timing your vacation

It's fairly obvious you're not going to get the best deals in Orlando during the peak holiday periods (spring break, the week between Christmas and New Year's). But what are the true value periods in terms of timing your vacation? Most experts will tell you that January, September and the first half of December feature the best savings. For a handy guide, I usually refer to Disney's own calendar — the company breaks the year down into various "seasons": Value, Regular, Summer, Peak, Holiday and Pre-holiday. (To see the exact dates for 2007, go to this link: disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/resorts/seasonalityChart?id=SeasonalityChartPage2&bhcp=1). You can bet if the Mouse House knows what dates are "hot" or not, so does the rest of Orlando.

Potential Savings: Just look at that Disney calendar and you'll see that rooms that go for as little as \$82 in the slow "Value" period can cost 50 percent more during the "Holiday" period.

Potential Pitfalls: If you've got kids, you may not be able to take full advantage of the best value-priced stretches of time, which typically fall during the school year. But there are still weekend trips you can consider during those periods.

Working with the Mouse

Speaking of Disney, it offers a few more ways to save, even if the Mouse isn't known to be a complete bargain. For starters, it offers periodic discounts to Florida residents on its resorts — earlier in May, some rooms could be had at a 20 percent savings. And its Value Resorts — All Star Music, Movies and Sports and Pop Century — are often available for less than 100 bucks a night. (There are also newer suites within the Music resort that resemble mini-apartments — not a tremendous value at an average rate of \$204 per night, but not unreasonable for Disney.) Finally, you can consider camping at Disney — namely, at the rustic but tranquil Fort Wilderness area: A campsite runs as little as \$41 per night.

Potential Savings: A few dollars here and there, unless you opt for the considerably cheaper camping route.

Potential Pitfalls: Camping? As in pitching tents and sleeping on the ground? Thanks, but no thanks: My idea of "roughing it" at Disney is skipping a second turn on the breakfast buffet line.

Bidding your way to a good night's sleep

As previously mentioned, you can find time shares through eBay, but you can also find a variety of short-term rentals — of time-share units or vacation homes — as well. Another great travel auction site: SkyAuction.com — it lists some Orlando rooms for a starting bid of \$10 a night (plus surcharges, however).

Potential Savings: We're talking auctions, so prices can vary. But the bargains are definitely there.

Potential Pitfalls: As with anything on eBay, it pays to know who you're dealing with — look at the seller's ratings before you bid. SkyAuction, a travel consolidator, sells its units directly — that is, the listings are all from its own inventory; our experiences with the site have all been positive.

Booking your hotel through an airline

It may seem strange to go to an airline's Web site seeking a hotel room, but trust me, it pays. The reason? Airlines negotiate special deals with hotels because they need so many units to help assemble their vacation packages. But they're just as willing to break down those packages into individual components — look for "land only" or "hotel and car" options (you can always decline the car rental).

Potential Savings: We found deals all over the place when we went to Continental and Delta sites. Rooms within Disney were a few dollars less than Disney's official rates. Rooms in the greater Orlando area were often 40 percent lower than even the usually hard-to-beat AAA rates.

Following the business crowd

True, downtown Orlando is at least a 20-minute drive from Disney (though it's closer to Universal and SeaWorld). But if you stay there on the weekends, lodgings that cater to the business crowd offer very good deals, especially on packages, for leisure travelers. A couple of solid choices: the Orlando Marriott Downtown and Grand Bohemian Hotel. Plus, being downtown affords you an opportunity to explore a great Florida city with a character all its own, evidenced by the hip, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, beautiful lakes and lively ethnic dining (Orlando has a large Vietnamese population).

Potential Savings: More than enough to make up what you'll spend on gas getting to and from the parks — and then some. At the downtown Marriott, a weekend room can be had for \$98 a night. That same room can go for more than \$150 during the week.

Potential Pitfalls: Did I say a 20-minute drive? Well, that's under ideal circumstances. If there's a problem on I-4, you can expect it to take longer.

Remembering the basics

When all else fails, it's always worth remembering the classic money-saving tools and programs. Some examples: a AAA membership (which, of course, also includes roadside protection and a variety of travel services, including free maps); the Entertainment book (available through many local nonprofit groups or through Entertainment.com); and the name-your-price site Priceline.com. I also make a point of identifying myself as a Florida resident when talking to any hotelier or travel agent: As is the case with Disney, special offers for locals abound, but you have to know to ask.

Potential Savings: All these time-honored methods will save you a modest amount. The one exception may be Priceline, but it does require you to accept the site's choice of lodging.

Potential Pitfalls: Hey, these are the basics, which means everyone knows about them. If you want real savings, refer to my first nine tips.

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