



10 Best Budget Destinations for 2013

The Editors of Budget Travel

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Year after year, friends and family of the *Budget Travel* staff inevitably ask us the same question: "Where's the coolest and most affordable place to go next?" Luckily, we work hard to get at the right answers for them. Each year before the holidays, the *BT* team combs through piles of data regarding new flight destinations, airline prices, places aggressively building new hotels, cities experiencing cultural booms, currency charts, and other statistics to compile our list of the 10 best Budget Destinations for the upcoming year. Some destinations were more interesting to us because they were so full of new and unique attractions (Northern Ireland!), and others were standby dream vacation spots that were suddenly more affordable than they've been in recent years (the Loire Valley, France). But the one thing they have in common is that they're completely accessible and ripe for exploring now. So read up, pick a place, and get planning!

TORONTO, CANADA

Why in 2013: Toronto is seriously having a moment. The cultural, entertainment, and financial capital of Canada has not only undergone a huge building boom (with more than 30,000 new homes being built over the past year alone) but New York City exports are opening up here at rapid pace, like the new Thompson and Trump hotels, and David Chang's Momofuku empire. (In fact, foodie-ism is at its prime in Toronto—the St. Lawrence food market, with its 120 specialty vendors, is regularly considered one of the world's best.) But what makes it a great budget destination is that unlike the rest of the world, hotel prices didn't increase at all in the first half of 2012, with the cost of an average room remaining at \$148, according to the 2012 Hotels.com Price Index. Like any good bustling North American city, there are myriad cultural options to be found here, from museums, great theater, art galleries, and shopping, but because this is a harbor town off Lake Ontario, there are also plenty of affordable outdoorsy activities like hiking, biking, and canoeing, especially around the Toronto Islands. And because about half of the population was born abroad, the ethnic food scene is as good as it gets anywhere in the world. Beyond Chinatown, Little Italy, and Little India, there is also a Koreatown, Little Portugal, Little Jamaica, and neighborhoods specializing in Polish, Japanese, and

Greek cuisine. One last dollar-saving factor? You don't need a car while visiting. The TTC, or Toronto Transit Commission, is the third largest transit system in North America, and completely simple to navigate.

When to Go: Peak visitor season is in the summertime, which means both airfare and hotel costs are much higher. If you're aiming to save some money, try September through November, or March through May.

ANTALYA, TURKEY

Why in 2013: If you've never heard of the Turkish Riviera, you're not alone—Americans have thus far rarely ventured to the southwestern Mediterranean coast of Turkey for holiday, unlike Eastern Europeans, who have been flocking here in droves for years. All that seems likely to change this year for several reasons: Average hotel prices have significantly and notably dropped from last year (from \$193 to \$146, almost 25 percent), and in 2011 it beat New York City to become the world's third most visited city by international tourists. The word is out about this city that's part beachfront, part metropolis, and part ancient town. And even though many of the tourists here are of the incredibly wealthy European variety (the city even boasts a megaresort, Rixos Sungate Hotel, with the world's second largest spa!), the 5-star all-inclusive resorts on the beaches offer rates as low as \$100 a night. More adventurous types will also get a huge kick out of the city's proximity to some of the oldest known architectural ruins in the world. The nearby Catalhoyuk Mound is one of the oldest and best-preserved Neolithic site to date, existing from 7500 BC to 5700 BC.

When to Go: It gets well into the 90s in the middle of summer, so it's best to visit in September through October, or May through June. While it never gets particularly cold in the winter months, you won't want to take a dip in the chilly Mediterranean then either.

LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

Why in 2013: According to the 2012 Hotel Price Index, the historic wine and chateaux region known as the Loire Valley (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) saw a 19 percent price decrease in average hotel rooms, bringing them to \$128—pretty good, considering going to France isn't generally considered a budget affair. And in November of this year, the Euro hit a two-month low against the dollar due to bailing out debt-burdened member nations. Bad news for Europeans, but it adds to your advantage when traveling right now. (As of press time, 1 Euro equalled \$1.27.) The best way to see the area is to rent a car in Paris and drive 150 miles south until you reach the middle stretch along the Loire River. You'll want to be able to drive to the various vineyards—the fertile land is home to the regions of Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé, as well as Muscadet. Add to the fact that there are hundreds of small country inns, charming B&Bs, and chateaux-turned-hotels here, ranging from as low as \$70 a night, and you're looking at an attainable dream trip in 2013.

When to Go: July and August are the most crowded, so we suggest aiming for spring and fall. The weather is still warm here in September, and the rolling hills take on a gorgeous golden hue.

PALM SPRINGS, CA

Why in 2013: With its towering namesake palms and countless pools, Palm Springs has long been heralded as California's desert oasis, where the stars and golf aficionados fled when they needed a little R&R. Now, with a 6 percent drop in airfares amid near-universal increases nationwide, it's also a

refuge for bargain-seeking travelers. Along with the decrease in ticket prices, Palm Springs International Airport is seeing a spike in traffic—over 16 percent more passengers flew through in 2012 than in 2011—and it's also expanding its reach with new, nonstop routes from New York launching in December through Virgin America. On the ground, the town has been rolling out the red carpet for visitors, making as much room as possible for the new surge of sun-seekers. The city gained over 1,600 new hotel rooms since 2008 through an aggressive tourism incentive program designed to boost the local economy, and it's also among the top 10 domestic markets for new vacation rental listings.

When to Go: With not-yet-scorching temperatures, winter and early spring remain peak seasons. Crowds descend on the area for big-ticket events in January (the Palm Springs International Film Festival) and April (perennially popular Coachella), and occupancy rates remain high in between. Opt for fall instead to beat both the heat and the masses.

KO PHI PHI, THAILAND

Why in 2013: Even if Ko Phi Phi isn't familiar by name, you still might recognize its turquoise waters, leaf-blanketed limestone peaks, and signature longtail boats—the hallmarks of this island paradise off the coast of Thailand inspired wanderlust the world over when it was spotlighted in the film *The Beach*, the drama that launched a thousand backpackers. An archipelago comprised of two main islands, Ko Phi Phi was on the rise as a holiday destination when it was devastated by the tsunami of 2004. Eight years and a rigorous rebuilding effort later, it's now well on its way to becoming a luxury tourist spot. Because of its high tourist concentration and the construction of plush new resorts such as the Outrigger Phi Phi Island Resort and Spa, Ko Phi Phi can be somewhat expensive by Thai standards. This year, however, hotel rates have dropped by 27 percent to an average of \$151 per night, compared with a 13 percent increase in nearby Phuket.

When to Go: Spring (March, April) offers a sweet spot between the peak tourist season of the holidays and the onslaught of the rainy season in May.

NASHVILLE, TN

Why in 2013: In the new hit ABC drama *Nashville*, a political powerbroker describes his hometown as "a thriving, prosperous city, an industrial and cultural juggernaut." In other words, the home of the Grand Ole Opry is going a little heavy on the "grand," while easing up considerably on the "ole." You might say life imitates art. This spring, a brand-new, \$585 million, 118,000-square-foot convention center will open downtown, which will in turn help fuel the city's ongoing hotel construction boom. To meet the needs, over 1,000 rooms are currently under construction, with five new hotels potentially slated for the SoBro (South of Lower Broadway) neighborhood alone—a move that is expected to drive average daily rates down in the city. But growth in Nashville isn't solely related to real estate. In a city known primarily for its "hot chicken" and "meat and three sides," chefs are helping to transform Nashville into a new culinary powerhouse, along the lines of Charleston, with all the requisite James Beard nominations and placements on top American restaurant lists. On the other end of the spectrum, buzzy food trucks are hitting the streets of hip neighborhoods like East Nashville and The Gulch, the first LEED-certified green neighborhood in the South.

When to Go: Gourmet restaurants and architecture aside, Nashville is still the capital of the country music world. From June 6 through 9, the city will play host to the CMA Music Festival, which attracts a who's who of country stars, including Carrie Underwood, Brad Paisley, Rascal Flatts, and Miranda Lambert (cmaworld.com/cma-music-festival, four-day passes from \$125).

NORTHERN IRELAND

Why in 2013: Northern Ireland has been a bit, well, troubled for the better part of the 20th century, thanks to the bloody religious conflict known as The Troubles. Peace has since been restored, but that didn't immediately skyrocket Northern Ireland to the top of travelers' bucket lists. So how's the outlook in 2013? Just ask the aptly named Oaky Dokes, the red squirrel mascot of Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland's second city and the first ever U.K. City of Culture (cityofculture2013.com). The 6th-century walled city beat out finalists Birmingham, Norwich, and Sheffield, and will spend \$25 million in new cultural programs designed to bring in tourism, including performances from the Royal Ballet and the London Symphony Orchestra, a new punk musical, and the premiere of a Sam Shepard play. The city itself has also gotten a makeover. Ebrington Square, former military parade grounds, reopened in 2012 as a new public space for outdoor concerts and festivals, and it also saw the opening of the Peace Bridge, which links the predominantly Catholic and Protestant sides of the city. Best of all, Northern Ireland is now easier (and cheaper) to get to: Beginning in fall 2012, EasyJet and Aer Lingus added more flights between Belfast and London, which is expected to increase competition with British Airways and thus further lower airline prices.

When to Go: The UK City of Culture program will run throughout 2013, but late March is a particularly rich period. On March 18, the London Symphony Orchestra will present the works of John Williams, with excerpts from *Jurassic Park*, *Jaws*, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. And on March 30-31, the Royal Ballet will perform for the first time in Northern Ireland in two decades.

SLOVAKIA

Why in 2013: After their amicable split in 1993, the Czech Republic and Slovakia took very different approaches to singledom. The Czech Republic, led by majestic Prague, became a major stop on the backpacker circuit and eventually caught on with jetsetters. Slovakia, on the other hand, has always remained more of a quiet hidden gem. But on the 20th anniversary of its independence, with one of the fastest growing economies in the EU, Slovakia finally seems ready for its close-up. In recent years, the capital Bratislava has seen the construction of a luxury riverside five-star resort and a brand-new community-run Jewish cultural center. Despite its growth, the capital has remained surprisingly affordable: According to the 2012 Priceoftravel.com Backpacker Index, Bratislava is more than half as cheap as nearby Vienna for travelers, ranking as the 10th biggest bargain among major European cities. But 2013 is really all about Slovakia's second city, Košice, which shares the European Capital of Culture designation with Marseille, marking the first time a Slovak city has held the title (www.kosice2013.sk/en). The well-preserved city, which dates back to the 12th century, boasts the largest cathedral in Slovakia, the Gothic St. Elizabeth. In 2013, however, the focus will be on the future. The city's 19th-century military barracks have been converted into Kulturpark, a creative district that will promote contemporary art, experimental theater, and modern dance, with performances and exhibits throughout the year.

When to Go: Capital of Culture events are scheduled throughout 2013, but one that shouldn't be missed is the Biela Noc, or White Night, on October 5, 2013. The program, which started in Paris in 2002 and has since spread across Europe, brings musical performances and art installations out into the streets of Košice well past sunset. Their slogan? "We guarantee you won't fall asleep."

BORACAY ISLAND, THE PHILIPPINES

Why in 2013: As tourism from east Asia and the United States grows each year, the white-sand beaches of this southeast Asian archipelago should move from your bucket list to your see-it-before-it's-overrun list—especially since Royal Caribbean made its first call to Boracay in October, a move that's sure to incite other cruise lines to do the same. This will no doubt have a universal impact on Philippines tourism and its still-affordable hotel prices. But it's also rather remarkable considering that tourists never even set foot on Boracay until the 1970s. Now there are more than 300 resorts and hotels for visitors to choose from on this thin speck of prime oceanfront real estate (less than a mile wide and less than four miles long) and last year the area saw more than 900,000 visitors. Regional airlines like Airphil Express make the hour-long flight from Manila to Boracay's new airport for less than \$25 round-trip.

When to Go: January to May is typically the best weather, but unless you're keen to celebrate Easter with thousands of other tourists, skip Holy Week (March 24 to 31 in 2013), when major cities are packed with visitors. While heavy rain is always possible here, the second half of the year is typhoon season and best to avoid.

THE BAHAMAS

Why in 2013: If it seems as if the Bahamas are an annual fixture on you-can-afford-to-go-here lists, well, they are—for good reason. According to Travelocity, fares to the islands, north of Cuba in the Atlantic ocean, fell 4 percent this year even as the number of visitors to the islands increased by 8 percent—the average airfare to the Bahamas in 2012 was \$463. From northernmost Grand Bahama, with its three national parks, underwater caves, and urbane nightlife, to the bustling port of Nassau, home to iconic Cable Beach and historic Bay Street lined with shops and cafes, the Bahamas remain a favorite "stylish steal" for savvy travelers—just take a look at hotel prices, which fell 2.5 percent from 2011 to 2012 according to the Bahamas Hotels Association. For a taste of authentic Bahamas cuisine, stop into Twin Brothers for mixed platters of local favorites like conch, snapper, and grouper (*Arawak Cay, Nassau, twinbrothersbahamas.com, grilled combos from \$20.50*).

When to Go: Mild trade winds keep the average temperatures in the 70s and 80s pretty much year-round, but rainy season is May through October, making the islands most hospitable in late fall, winter, and early spring.