

An Insider's Guide For Creating and Planning The Most Affordable California Vacation

Even though California is a large state and typically has the tendency to be more expensive to travel than most states around the country, there are still plenty of incredible places to see and plenty of things to do even if you are pinching pennies and have a tight budget. Finding or creating an affordable California vacation is easier than ever if you have the right tools and right approach. Here are a few pointers to keep in mind when getting ready for that California vacation.



Planning an Affordable California Vacation

Properly and effectively planning a vacation by far will have the most impact on your budget. Follow the old travel adage for booking flights, hotels, and reservations: The earlier the better. Airfare and hotels are going to give you the best opportunity for an affordable California vacation. Planning months in advance (even weeks) can save you around \$100 to \$200 on just California airfare alone. You can expect similar savings when booking hotels and resorts. The best time to plan your trip is between one and four months. Not only will planning ahead of time give you the convenience of being flexible with what you do, but it's going to impact your budget which in effect will give you more options.

Sometimes we only think about "affordable" in terms of money. When on vacation in California (especially the cheap, budget-friendly type where minutes are valuable), you have to think about the importance and cost of your time. You don't want to spend hours in a long layover flight or worse caught up in that famous California freeway traffic. Planning where to go and when to do it are vital components of traveling to California on a budget.

Where Can I Go On a Budget In California?

We've seen it all too often: people missing the ferry to an island, paying way too much at a hotel or resort, getting trapped in the California traffic, or being that person stuck standing in line ride after a ride at Disneyland. What's worse, most of the time people are over-spending to do all those fun California-y things. One key to going to California on a budget is to get an insider's opinion on fun things to do in California, yet still readily affordable. Some very popular cheap California destinations include Carlsbad, Joshua Tree National Park, Big Bear Lake, Eureka, Pismo Beach, and Big Sur. All of these feature relatively low hotel prices and are close to major airports.

With that said, you don't have to travel outside San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to have an affordable, budget-friendly California vacation. Each of these California hallmarks features plenty to do without breaking the bank.

San Diego

First things first, visit the [San Diego Visitors Bureau website](#) for some of the best deals to explore, plan, and stay in San Diego. Don't be surprised if you find every entertaining need for your vacation in just this one spot. This site is a very valuable tool if you want to visit San Diego.

San Diego is known for its beaches and luckily for budget-friendly travel goers, most of its beaches are free with no admission fees and many have free parking. Other free (or inexpensive) things to do in San Diego include:

- Mission Beach

Most of the activities at Mission Beach center around Belmont Park where you can enjoy roller coasters, bike rides, or engage in some beach games. A walk down the Mission Bay jetty will give you that traditional California vibe you might be striving for. Swimming (don't worry, there are plenty of lifeguards), walking the beach, fishing, or biking ... Mission Beach is somewhere you can easily spend a little cash and have a lot of fun.

- La Jolla

This small seaside town offers the nostalgic sunset beach views for a small parking fee. Explore the tidepools, walk to the cove, or visit the small shops in town. You can easily spend a wholesome afternoon in this small San Diego jewel.

- Balboa Park

Home to nearly 30 attractions and [museums](#) ranging from art to astronomical. There are a handful of free things to do such as visit the Timken Museum of Art or take part in a free guided tour.

“The San Diego Airport is located at the edge of downtown San Diego—it’s a smaller airport that is easy to navigate through. Within minutes after you get off the plane, you are on the curb. Lots of transportation choices (rental cars, hotel shuttles, Uber, etc.) If you go directly to downtown, it’s a quick 10-minute trip. The San Diego Zoo (which is also on the edge of downtown, but on the opposite side of the airport) is about a 15-20 minute Uber. If your hotel is north of downtown, the nearby attractions are Old Town San Diego and SeaWorld. If you head even further north, you hit Carlsbad which is where LEGOLAND is located.”

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San Francisco

Let’s start with the free stuff. At the top of that list is a stroll across the Golden Gate Bridge. Aside from transportation to get there, walking along one of the most iconic spots in California (and the U.S. for that matter) is a no brainer. Other free options include visiting Chinatown, the Cable Car Museum, Pier 39, Fisherman’s Wharf, or take a walk down Lombard street (the most crooked street in the world).

San Francisco may be a small town in area in relation to Los Angeles and San Diego, but don’t let that fool you. There is plenty to do here and at reasonable prices.

- Rose Garden at Golden Gate Bridge Park

We put this near the top because it is free. This garden features over 50 rose beds and can be the perfect way to capitalize your walk across the Golden Gate Bridge. This garden is part of the Golden Gate Park which has more attractions than you'll have time for.

- The San Francisco CityPASS

Essentially this is a San Francisco discount card on popular attractions. Depending on what attractions and museums you want to see, the [CityPASS](#) can save you money and is good for up to 9 consecutive days. The admission includes Aquarium of the Bay, Blue and Gold Fleet Bay Cruise Adventure, 3 Day Cable Car and Muni Bus Passport, California Academy of Sciences, and either the Exploratorium or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The CityPASS is definitely not free, but if you take advantage of everything you have admissions to, you will save quite a bit and stay within your budget.

Another tip with airfare travel to San Francisco: Check out [Southwest's low fare calendar](#) when you're planning your trip to get the best prices on airfare. If you use airfare comparison sites you will not see fares from Southwest in the comparison matrix because Southwest doesn't make flights available through those websites. And you may want to consider flying into Oakland airport because aside from their arrival record (better than SFO's) it is just as close to downtown San Francisco.

Los Angeles

This bears repeating: You do not have to give up fun and entertainment to travel to California on a budget. Los Angeles is no different. There are ample free things to do in Los Angeles: a walk down Hollywood Boulevard, a visit to the Griffith Observatory, or a walk through one of Los Angeles' relaxing beaches are just a few of the more notable cheap (free) traditions in Southern California.

Los Angeles has so much to offer all types of travelers. But if you're hitting up Southern California on a budget, you're going to want to check out a few of these budget-friendly recommendations.

- Free Museums

There are over 20 free museums in Los Angeles. Some of these will charge you for parking and some of them still require a ticket (plan in advance...but it's still free), but there are copious museums to satiate your taste of Southern California. Here are some of the top free museums: The Broad Museum, Getty Museum and Getty Villa, the California Science Center, the California African American Museum, and the UCLA Hammer Museum in Westwood.

- Southern California CityPASS

Just like the San Francisco CityPASS, the Southern California CityPASS is a multi-attraction. It's best to plan ahead and buy the pass [online](#), so you can avoid having to buy it in person. Essentially the pass allows you entry into each attraction, so you can buy one pass for several attractions at a discounted price. Once you initially use it, you'll then have up to 14 days to enjoy the other attractions before the CityPASS expires. Just like the San Francisco CityPASS, you will save money if you plan on using the pass at multiple attractions. The attractions include Universal Studios, LEGOLAND, Disneyland, Sea World, and San Diego and the option for a ticket upgrade to the San Diego Zoo. But check the website for more information and potential deals depending on the season. Those who get the deepest discounts are those who have children (ages 3 to 9) and are planning on visiting at least two of these attractions listed above.

- Go Los Angeles

Go LA is much like the Southern California CityPASS and claims it can save you up to 60 percent vs. buying tickets separately. It's like the popular "bundle and save" options we see, but with attractions in the Los Angeles area. With this pass, you can gain access to over 35 Los Angeles attractions. Go Los Angeles' [website](#) has a full list of attractions: Universal Studios Hollywood, Knott's Berry Farm, Warner Bros. Studio Tour, Aquarium of the Pacific, and Six Flags Magic Mountain are just a few of the top-notch Southern California destinations you can expect to visit should you opt-in for the Go LA pass. For even deeper discounts, the service also allows you to "Build Your Own" pass which saves you up to 20 percent on pass vs. buying them separately. The best part of the Go LA option is their [Free Guidebook](#) they offer to the public to help plan a trip. Take advantage of this! Don't be surprised if you use this to plan your whole vacation to Los Angeles.

Want even better airfare rates if you plan on visiting Los Angeles? Try booking your flight through Southwest to Southern California through Orange County (SNA), Burbank (BUR), or Long Beach (LGB) airports.

Use Southwest Vacations Search Engine To Find the Best Deals For Affordable California Vacations

Finding the best affordable California vacation is simple using [Southwest Vacations](#). We've provided some simple, yet effective tips for getting everything you need to begin planning your affordable California vacation. Through a simple process of plugging in your departure and arrival locations and dates (remember what we mentioned above about alternative airports), then selecting the hotel or resort, you can begin to plan and prepare for that budget-friendly [California vacation](#).

One of the best budget-friendly features of this vacation tool is the search filters. Users can drill down by hotel, price, rating, hotel amenities, the type of experience, and geographically-centered points of interest which means you can select intriguing points of interest in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or San Diego. Inside each of these filters is a plethora of options. To really make your California vacation super affordable yet still packed with fun and entertaining activities, when choosing "Things To Do" (either by selecting "Activities" on the tool on the homepage or after selecting your flight and/or hotel), try sorting your options by "Price – Lowest to Highest". There are intriguing things to do in California ranging from as high as \$400 (not so affordable) to as low as \$4!

Just to give you an idea of what kind of affordable Californian activities you could engage in, we put together a shortlist (they are in no particular order). Here are a handful of things we found for under \$30!

- Electric Bike Ride on the Gold Coast
- An Art Tour in Los Angeles
- A Street Art Tour

- Hollywood Walking and Hiking Tour
- \$5 Golden Gate Bridge Walking Tour
- San Francisco Scavenger Hunt
- Ferry to Angel Island (San Francisco)
- San Diego Harbor Cruise and Sea Lion Adventure
- An Axe Throwing Adventure

With minimal effort, you can create a customized, affordable California vacation without the hassle of organizing your trip by puzzling together separate (and oftentimes confusing) itineraries.

What's your favorite vacation spot in California? Tell us in the comments! (We're always looking for our next favorite place!)

You can also visit our Discussion Forums and get advice and answers on all things travel related. Check out our sections on visiting [Los Angeles](#) and [San Diego](#) for more California travel information.