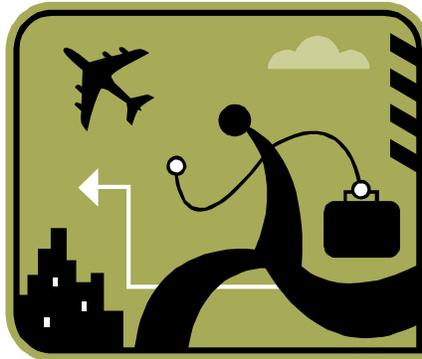


Conference Travel on a Budget



Disclaimer

The information presented in this guide is accurate to the best of my knowledge. It has been provided as a reference tool only. I take no responsibility or liability for unsatisfactory results stemming from the use of the information provided here. Some methods or procedures in this guide come with inherent risk, and by following them, you are agreeing to that risk. Make sure you consult booking rules and regulations for the companies you will be dealing with **BEFORE** attempting to make your reservation.

At no point in this guide will I advocate any actions that may be deemed by local laws as being illegal. You are asked to use your best judgment when it comes to making reservations. Please realize that unreported occupancy in a motel/hotel room may make you subject to extra fees or fines.

If you have any questions, please email me at mongc@yahoo.com with "Travel Tips" in the subject line.

Planning to Plan

Step 1: Assess your needs

Maybe it's the instructional designer in me, but my first step in planning travel is to assess my specific needs. Here are the things you need to think about before you start "serious" planning:

- Dates – This may seem obvious, but in order to get an idea of pricing, you need to know EXACTLY which days you will be traveling. Both hotel and flight prices fluctuate based upon occupancy, season, day of the week, etc ... a difference of one day could mean a difference of hundreds of dollars for flights and hotels, and this is just the difference in fares, not the potential cost of staying an extra day at your destination.
- Convenience – You need to decide, which is more important ... money or convenience? If you have several presentations each day or other duties that will necessitate you to spend long stretches of time at the conference, it may be worth booking conference hotels so that you a) will always be close to the action and b) can use short breaks to sneak up to the room for a quick snack, break, nap ... whatever.
- Funding – If you are lucky enough to be either fully-funded or mostly-funded, savings might definitely take a backseat to convenience.
- What can you afford now? – Many of the techniques I will discuss require immediate payment by credit card. If you don't have a credit card or must wait until at the conference to pay, then your savings might be greatly reduced ... but when compared to a credit card balance you might otherwise have to run for four months, waiting is sometimes the best option.
- Travel with friends – If you can determine before you book whether or not you will have a roommate, then this may make a difference on which airfare/hotels you choose. Carpooling, sharing a room, etc ... all great ways to reduce costs, though some students have found that larger groups (3-4+) in a room may be more hassle than it's worth.

Step 2: Start planning as soon as you can

I'm not sure that anyone, even the people who created the airline and hotel pricing/inventory systems, can predict airline prices on a consistent basis. Given fuel costs, however, my general prediction is **UP**. If you start your planning early enough, however, you can start to get an idea of what *average* costs are for the general time period when you want to travel. It's alright if you want to wait to book until you know when you are presenting, etc, but if you do little bit of work beforehand, you can hit the ground running once you get your confirmation letter. Remember, lots of other people may be waiting to book until right then too, so early preparation might help you to edge them out.

Step 3: It never hurts to make back-up hotel reservations

Read through the fine-print on your conference website. If you can make a reservation for the conference hotel and then cancel later without penalty, go ahead and do so. This will a) secure a room

b) let you see what the final cost for that room will be for your stay and c) give you opportunity to beat that price with the worst-case scenario being that you already have a room.

Getting to the Conference

This may seem silly, but I always worry more about getting to the conference than staying there. I guess I figure that I'll always be able to find *someplace* to stay, but finding that perfect flight or perfect price may take a little time.

Tip 1: Choosing your preferred method of conveyance

- Plane
If you are going to travel across country, this will probably be the only feasible option when looking at prices and schedules.
- Train
If you are living in the region where the conference is being held, don't forget about AmTrak. I paid \$32 roundtrip for West Lafayette to Chicago, which was less than a single day of parking at the hotel in Chicago. Sure, it took four hours each way, but I didn't have to drive in the city and I saved some bank. On average, cross-country trips I've checked on have been more expensive than the available plane fare for the same trip, and the price may triple or quadruple if you want to have a place to stay/sleep other than just your seat.
- Automobile
My first question is always ... is it feasible to drive? If the conference is in a big city (and aren't they all?) the next question is always ... is it feasible to park? With high gas prices and the charges for parking in most cities, I generally avoid driving if at all possible. However, it may end up being the best mode in the end.
- Other
Some grad students I know have decided that Greyhound was the best way for them to get where they were going. I can't say that I have experience with the Big Grey Dog and the idea of a long bus-ride doesn't exactly sound thrilling ... but it's always good to go through your options.

Remember ... there is a money-value for your time!

Tip 2: Find the best price (for flights)

The flight is always the place where I feel there is the biggest opportunity to overpay. Since airfares fluctuate sometimes on an hourly basis, having an "average price" in mind can help you keep from overpaying. Also, look for one-way flights on different airlines. Here are some websites to know:

- Kayak – <http://www.kayak.com> – this is a flight comparison site that is very useful. Keep in mind that flights from Southwest Airlines do not show up.
- SideStep – <http://www.sidestep.com> – see description for Kayak.
- Southwest Airlines – <http://www.southwest.com> – see above

Important Tip! Unless you don't have a choice, you should always book your flight directly through the airline website instead of sites like Orbitz, Travelocity, etc. Not only do these sites add a booking fee, but if you run into problems, you have to deal with their staff instead of dealing directly with the airlines (who might know their own systems much better).

Important Tip! While discounts are rare for flights, they do exist. For example, if you own an Entertainment book (sold for fundraisers or from Entertainment.com), you can get 5% off of a single American Airlines flights. Also, if you sign up for an airline's frequent flier program, you will sometimes be able to access special discounts or sales. Large travel sites may also package flights and hotels at discounted rate.

Tip 3: Don't forget the baggage fees

Because of rising fuel costs, posted fares don't include what they used to. Some have cut free snacks/beverages, while others have added charges for checked bags. Make sure you add these fees into that price you get off of Kayak or the airline's website. Baggage charges are added when you check in and are for ONE WAY only. These can change at a moment's notice, so please read the fine print before booking.

Airlines currently charging for first checked bag:

- American, Northwest/Delta, US Air, United, Continental, AirTran

Airlines currently not charging for first checked bag:

- Southwest (2 free checked bags)

With airlines charging for checked bags, carry-on space has become harder to snag and rules about carry-on size are being enforced, so check your carry-ons with posted guidelines before you travel. Remember that FAA rules state you can only have one large bag and one personal item. Airlines currently often remind ladies that your purse is a personal item, so no roller-board, large bag, and purse combinations are allowed.

Tip 4: Sometimes you can get a price adjustment

Southwest and AirTran have good policies on price adjustments. With both airlines, if the price drops below what you paid after you've booked it, you can get a credit of the difference for future flights (usually within a year of the initial booking date). Southwest's system is so great that you can actually do it yourself online. The "legacy carriers" such as American and Delta will usually provide the same service, though they impose a \$100 change fee. Obviously, if this fee is less than your refund amount, it may be worth the hassle. If you are ever curious, just call and ask ... the worst thing you can be told is "No."

Tip 5: What I think is a good price when flying from IND (non spring-break and not including baggage)

To Florida: <\$200 R/T

To California: <\$250 R/T

To New York area: <\$280 R/T

Finding a Place to Stay

Note: If you want/need to stay in the conference hotel, this section is not for you. It sometimes works out and sometimes doesn't. You have to go in with the assumption that it won't.

Step 1: Find the cost of staying at a conference hotel

You need to know this cost (with taxes and fees if you can get them) in order to judge how much effort to spend in order to stay elsewhere. If you are only saving \$10/night to stay half-a-mile down the road, I would pay the \$10.

Step 2: Research the conference site

You need to make sure that the conference hotel(s) is not your *only* option. For example, if the conference site is in the middle of nowhere or cannot be walked to, you will need to figure taxi or car rental costs into your budget.

Step 3: Research hotels within a (walkable/drivable) distance

Check hotels in the area to see if there are any immediate deals to be had. If they don't have penalties for cancellations, it never hurts to make reservations as a back-up, just in case. This is a good time to look for AAA rates, internet-only rates (sometimes non-cancellable), etc.

Step 4: Look at packages

Sometimes large travel sites such as Orbitz or Expedia will offer packages with hotel rooms, flights, car rental, etc. These can work out to be a decent deal if you buy everything together.

Taking a Risk

Your hotel room, especially for extended stays, is an area where you can save a lot of money. However there are some things to keep in mind for the following sites:

Priceline

- Pros – Name your own price, very “workable” system, usually has the cheapest price possible if you work within the system
- Cons – Pay upfront without knowing “where,” reservation guaranteed for two people only, no guarantee for room type (king/doubles, smoking, etc), may get less desirable room, may end up a long distance from the conference

Hotwire

- Pros – Set discounted price, can sometimes be more “sure” about what you are booking, listing of amenities takes some out some guesswork, can specify number of people in room (up to 4)
- Cons – Payment upfront without knowing “where,” prices sometimes higher than Priceline, room type may not be specified, may get less desirable room

Priceline

We've probably all seen the commercials with William Shatner talking about "naming your own price." Despite the advertising, however, the concept is initially very scary. You are asked to provide a bid that automatically creates a non-refundable, pre-paid reservation if accepted. Most people worry that they will pay too much, end up in a dive, and be completely miserable. There are ways to try to avoid that, however, if you know the system.

About Priceline

Priceline's bidding system is dependent on two factors: location and star-rating. For locations, cities or regions are broken up into different zones, and bidding within a zone will only come back with "wins" from within that zone. The same is true for star-ratings. You can choose what star-ratings you are willing to accept, and you will only receive a win from hotels at that rating or higher. To keep things in perspective however, here's my general perception of hotel star-ratings:

- Resort – Big, nice hotel near an attraction (like a beach, DisneyWorld, etc). There may be extra resort fees you will have to pay when you check in that are not a part of your winning bid
- 5 Star – World Class hotel – probably out of your league paying full price
- 4 Star – Deluxe hotel – Westin, Hyatt, etc.
- 3 Star – Good hotel – Radisson, Crown Plaza, Sheraton, etc ... will have a restaurant on premises
- 2.5 Star – Decent hotel – Holiday Inn Express, Hyatt Place, etc ... no restaurant on premises
- 2 Star and below – Book at your own peril – Days Inn, Extended Stay America

Working the System

In Priceline's system, you can make one hotel bid per day for a certain zone and star-rating. If your bid fails, you can only redo the bid if you add another zone or decrease your star-rating. However, if you're in the know, you can exploit Priceline's system to your advantage and try to ensure that you get as close to the lowest price as possible.

Step 1: Web Resources

Visit <http://www.biddingfortravel.com>. People on this board keep track of which hotels they've won and for how much. You can't take their list as being completely accurate (as zones, hotels can change), but you can usually use the list to identify which zone(s) you're shooting for. If you are unsure, open up another web browser and map the distances between the hotels and your conference using Mapquest or Google Maps.

Step 2: Find the star-rating available for each zone in your city

Visit Priceline and make like you are going to bid. After you input your city and dates and choose to name your own price, you will be shown the list of zones for the city. Select the zone, and look below to see which star-ratings are available. Only available-star ratings will be selectable. Write down these ratings for that zone on your piece of paper, then unselect that zone and choose the next one. Continue this process until you've gotten the ratings available in each individual zone.

Hint! Double-check your work or your strategy will backfire and you may end up on the wrong side of town!

Step 3: Determine your desired zone

Looking at the hotel list on Bidding for Travel and looking at the zones on Priceline, try to determine which zone best fits your needs for the conference. Since conference sites tend to be in well-populated hotel areas, there is generally one zone that fits very well ... as well as you are willing to walk a little bit.

Step 4: Determine your lowest star-rating

Decide how low you are willing to go. Personally, I usually don't go below 3-star unless I am fairly confident that I know what I may receive with a lower bid. I always shoot for 4-star and above.

Step 5: Find the zones that don't match for re-bids

Here's how you work the system. Go through your list of zones and circle all of the zones that do not have ANY star-ratings equal to or above your lowest star-rating. For example, if you will only go as low as 3-star, circle every zone that only has 2.5-star hotels and below.

These zones you've circled (and double-checked) are your free-rebid zones. Remember how Priceline will only let you bid once per day without changing zone or star-rating? Well, your circled zones are zones you can use for an immediate re-bid because they do not have any hotels eligible for your chosen star-rating. Priceline will never give you a hotel with a rating below what you bid for (it will give you above, though).

Step 6: Match prices with hotels that may be in your zone

Use the list on Bidding for Travel to make sure that you go to those hotel's websites and get current pricing. The last thing you want to do is bid, giving up some of your flexibility, and have your bid be only slightly less expensive (or more) than what you could book for knowing exactly what you will get.

Step 7: Start low and high

Especially if you are getting a head start on your booking, you can take this slow and extend your bidding over days/weeks waiting for that great deal (and perhaps having a backup reservation just in case). Start very low and work up. For example, if most hotels in the area are going for \$150/night, perhaps you want to start your bidding at \$40/night. The best deal I ever got was \$57/night for a \$280/night room (at their current booking prices). Always start with your highest star-rating, as you can always decrease it each level to your lowest with a free re-bid for each decrease.

Step 8: Check over everything

Priceline bids are non-refundable, and you must input your credit card information before making a bid. You will be shown a "review" page that has your city/zones selected, desired star-rating, and final price (bid multiplied by number of days plus taxes and fees). Double-check everything on this page to make sure that you didn't make any mis-clicks, as there are no do-overs.

Step 9: Fail? Try again.

You shouldn't win your first bid. If you did, you probably could have started lower (so remember that next time). You will be given the option of bidding again if you add zones to your bid or lower your star-rating. Go ahead and use those zones you've circled and slowly increase your bid (usually \$5-10 increments). If you think you'd get a cheaper price bidding for 3-star hotels as opposed to 4-star, you

might switch over to 3-star early in the process ... though when you make the switch, make sure that you lower your bid (since you may come up with a cheaper option that was not eligible in your original 4-star bids).

Step 10: Running out of options

If you find yourself running out of options, don't feel like you **MUST** win today. Stick with your plan to score a room as cheap as possible, not as quickly as possible. Don't jack up your bid in desperation or you may pay more than you need.

If you run out of options, quit for the day. You must wait 24-hours before you can start the bidding process over again (same user, same zones and ratings, etc). Tomorrow, you may start your minimum bid a little higher. If you are trying to book way-early, you may just keep trying the same bids every day. Pricing and inventory fluctuate, so a bid may be accepted in two weeks that wasn't accepted today. Usually more rooms open when you get closer to a date, as hotels are trying to sell off their inventory. In case you are curious ... if the conference hotel is sold out, it will **NOT** be on Priceline (why sell for a discount when they can sell at rack rates?). Odds are hotels will not list rooms on Priceline more than 6 months out.

Step 11: The immediate re-bid (rare)

In some circumstances after a bid, Priceline will come back at you with a new option. You will be given the option of bidding a certain amount for a guaranteed win. If you have any more free re-bids of your own, **DON'T TAKE** this offer. Instead, add an ineligible zone and undercut the increase Priceline suggested by at least half. I've done this three times and have always won the next bid (adding \$5 instead of \$15, etc). Priceline is hoping you will take the guaranteed offer so they can pocket the difference ... don't fall for it unless you are desperate.

Step 12: Keep trying ... but don't overpay just to win

Step 13: So you won, now what?

When your bid is accepted, you will be taken to a page that displays your hotel information. Print this out (or come back to it later) and at some point before your trip, place a call to the hotel to "confirm" your reservation. What you are really doing here is trying to secure the types of beds you want and perhaps your smoking preference. In some instances, you may be told that with a Priceline reservation, you get what you get, while other hotels will gladly make changes right then. If nothing else, ask if they can make a note in the system. I've found that the desk person, who actually has to face you, is usually much more accommodating than the phone operator, so don't lose heart if you get shot down before you arrive at the hotel (but be prepared for the worst just in case).

Chris's budget-travel philosophy: If I'm sharing a room and get stuck with one bed, we can make arrangements. If I have to sleep on the floor of a 4-star hotel for a night or two, it may be worth it for saving \$100/night ... or, you know, I could probably spend \$10/night on a roll-away.

Want more savings?

Signing up for referral sites (like Fatwallet.com) and clicking their link to Priceline when you make your bid can net you a percentage back. There's nothing like saving \$150/night AND getting 3% back.

Hotwire

Hotwire is a little like Priceline-lite. Instead of bidding for an unknown hotel, you are shown prices for an unknown hotel. You are able to base your selection on star-level (a little different than Priceline's, but similar), zone, and amenities offered. Doing post-bid research, I'm of the opinion that Hotwire's prices are generally higher per night than a bid on Priceline, but that money can be worth it if you are after specific amenities (such as a hotel shuttle) or if you are afraid of receiving a poorly-reviewed hotel. Hotwire is also a good option if you are going to have 3-4 people in your room as you can specify that in your search.

About Hotwire

Just like with Priceline, you will not see the name of the hotel you've chosen until after you pay. Your payment is also non-refundable, so there's no backing-out if you don't like the end result.

Web resources

The website I like to use for Hotwire is <http://www.betterbidding.com>. This site keeps updated lists about the amenities offered by hotels in each zone. You can't be 100% sure when using this list, but in general, you can have a pretty good idea about what hotel you will receive based upon the amenities listed on the Hotwire page.

Another good resource is <http://www.tripadvisor.com>. I use this page for hotel reviews anyway, but for some Hotwire offerings, when you click on the offer for more details, it will list the TripAdvisor rating at the bottom of the page. Not only can this rating perhaps let you narrow down which hotel you might be booking, but it will also give you an idea if you should book or run away screaming. Individual reviews should always be taken with a grain of salt, but if there are 250+ reviews and the hotel is hovering in the 2/5 zone, you should probably stay away.

Booking

Booking is much more straightforward here than on Priceline. Do your research, try to get a good idea of what you are booking, and if it all looks good, do it. Just like with Priceline, you might want to call the hotel before your arrival to "confirm" your reservation and try to get your room preferences into the system.

Important tip! From experience, I've learned that indicating 3 people in a room can still land you in a single king room. Indicating 4, however, should almost always put you in a room with two beds. I've sometimes indicated more people than necessary (as long as there wasn't a price difference) in order to increase my chances of two beds. Just like with Priceline, the hotels are not obligated to comply with your room requests (but they must meet the occupancy on your booking), but generally will try to accommodate you.

Want more savings?

Signing up for referral sites (like Fatwallet.com) and clicking their link to Hotwire when you make your bid can net you a percentage back.

Getting from the airport to your hotel and back again

It's important that you don't forget the little details, like how to get to your hotel/the conference from the airport. I don't think I've been to a conference hotel yet that has had a free shuttle (besides Walt Disney World). If you plan ahead, you can sometimes save a little money.

Grab a cab

A cab can be your best bargain, or the most expensive option, depending on how many people you are traveling with and how far away your destination is. If you are traveling in a group of 3-4, you might look into taxi rates. You can call taxi companies ahead of time for fare estimates.

Shared ride

The bargain for the individual traveler, a shared-ride van may be an option (<http://www.supershuttle.com>, <http://www.primetimeshuttle.com>, <http://www.mears.com>, etc). You will sacrifice time-to-destination for a savings, but generally, it is worth it. Keep in mind you may have to wait for the shuttle to arrive, and then for others to be dropped off ahead of you. Some companies let you pre-pay your shuttle ride online, which may help you control your expenses or ensure that you get a receipt. One to two hours of travel time while others are being dropped off is not unheard of, so again think of the value of your time.

Car service

If you have 3+ in your group, you may look into the price of a car service. These will give you a set-priced ride (instead of metered service in a taxi) and are generally in a sedan or other comfortable ride. In some instances, hiring a private car can actually be cheaper and more convenient than a taxi or shared-ride service.

Car rental

By searching travel sites (Expedia, Hotwire, company sites) you may decide that a car is a good option (you can also bid on Priceline). Make sure you know your hotel's (and/or conference's) parking rates up front, as this may negate any savings of having a car. Also make sure you have a driver willing to do the task (I know I didn't want to drive in LA). You usually can only have one "official" driver unless you pay to add extra names to the reservation.

Important tip! Don't get bullied into insurance unless you feel you must have it. Most credit cards offer free rental insurance. If you own a car, your personal insurance may cover rentals ... check your card/insurance policy to know for sure.

Important tip! Before accepting a car and pulling it off the lot, inspect it for large scratches, dings, etc. You don't want to be held liable for damage you didn't do. Report this damage immediately. Photos may be a good idea as well.

Public transportation

Sometimes there are bus and light-rail routes available from the airport that are much cheaper than any other option. I generally prefer not hauling luggage on public transportation, but it can be done, especially if you know the city or have taken the time to familiarize yourself with the routes.

Miscellaneous

Conference Rates

Generally this is a set cost. However, if you know you are going, most conferences offer reduced Early Bird rates for early registrants. Check your conference website for details.

Some conferences also ask for grad student volunteers. You are asked to work a certain amount of hours at the conference in exchange for a discount on your registration. Think about the money-value of your time and what you are planning to do at the conference before agreeing to this.

Food

Several things in life are inevitable: death, taxes, and sky-high prices at the conference site for food/drink. If at all possible, always eat off-site. Walk down the street. Take a shuttle. Whatever. Just get out of the \$20 for a hamburger zone.

Pack your own snacks if you can. Those cups of Ramen you stashed in your checked bag or those granola bars in your backpack can come in handy when avoiding local pricing. If you can get to a large retail store a drug store, you can also stock up on food without having to pack it. I'm always glad when I see a Walgreens close to my hotel. Instant oatmeal using hot water from your room's coffee-maker is a cheap and sensible breakfast option.

Internet

If you are staying in a big-fancy hotel, odds are they are going to want \$10-20 a day for Internet in your room. If you've saved a ton on the room, this may be worth it to you. Otherwise, if you are in the need for an online fix, see if your conference offers free wi-fi. Also, don't forget your neighborhood coffee shop's access point. I remember sitting on the floor outside of an indoor coffee shop in Chicago at night. The shop was closed, but their free wi-fi extended out to the hallway. Search engines such as Hot Spot Haven (<http://www.hotspothaven.com/>) may guide you towards the nearest hotspot in your area.

Getting roommates

The "standard" way to reduce your costs is to spread them around amongst a group. I'm all for finding a roommate, but I generally think that 4+ grad students in a room leads can lead to tempers, bad feelings, and homicide. Okay ... hopefully not homicide ... but remember that living in close quarters with someone is much different than seeing them 10 minutes every-other day.

Plan your fun

Even professors will tell you, conferences are not all about "work." Sometimes you can book your extra-curricular activities online at a savings. Some touristy things, like visiting Independence Hall in Philadelphia, almost require advanced online reservations. Do your research, look at costs, and try to find coupons or other discounts. For example, in Anaheim a few years ago, a group of us visited Knott's Scary Farm (the nighttime, Halloween version of Knott's Berry Farm). Because of my planning and preparation, we spent \$20/pp for admission instead of \$40 leading to a fun and cost-effective time.