

Stretching the Euro

“Tourist restaurants are off limits for disciples of the Herman El Cheapo”

Travelling to Europe, converting Australian dollars to the Euro has always been a humbling experience for Australians. And with the latest economic slump, it's gone from bad to worse.

For students living on a shoestring, Europe can be a financial nightmare, but time and time again, people are proving that the land-mass famous for its overpriced tourist attractions and restaurants can be wrestled down into a beat-sized brunch-bar.

Tickets though are the biggest expense of any trip, let alone to Europe. For example, Melbourne to London airfares can cost \$4000 during peak season, noticeably November to January.

To keep your bank account looking healthy, travel during the off-season, prior to the stampede of photo-clickers and honey-suckling toddlers. Ticket prices are rudely cheaper in and around northern springtime, covering March to May. In addition, hotel prices are discounted and the weather is adamantly more pleasant.

Another cost-cutting tool is to book your flights online. One golden rule is the earlier you book, the cheaper your flights will be. Leave it till later and your wallet will be ruing a few big ones lost.

In the same vein, closer to the date, STA Travel and travel.com.au or Student Flights run off-the-cuff cheap flight deals. These bargain hunters are able to provide discounted prices, due to their heavy reliance on budget airlines that connect in Singapore and other South East Asian terminals.

For example, Air China recently ran a special deal from October to November where the plane stops over at Beijing or Shanghai and then flies to over 40 European



destinations for \$1228.

Once there, by far the cheapest way to eat is with the locals. Tourist restaurants are off limits for disciples of the Herman El Cheapo.

Trail a few and you'll be able to find food served with a splash of blue-collared honesty for \$10, instead of being obsequiously placated by plastic tourist hotspots offering multilingual service for \$1 a word. These locals, by nature, know where the good stuff is, and being around them is one of the most unique ways to discover more about their culture, without a tour guide or a nauseating "cultural tour" fee being stuffed down your throat.

DIY disciples though should invest in a travel gas stove. A \$30-\$40 Bleuet 206 stove weighs 280 grams and gas cartridges should last about two hours and can be exchanged for a fee, all of which can easily be packaged in your 60L backpack. Chuck a pan on and cook up some food from Europe's vast catalogue general grocery stores from ALDI in Berlin to the GB in

Belgium for a cheap dinner.

Looking to dine out, you can find early bird deals in most eateries in Europe where savvy locals eat for under \$10. Don't order sitting down or at a table, because hospitality fees in Europe are beyond a reasonable man's pay cheque. Also, when in a restaurant, learn to eat local food produce. In Dublin, order a Guinness. In Spain, eat some Andalucía tapas. It's local and the produce doesn't have to be exported, meaning you save.

To find cheaper accommodation check out websites such as eurocheapo.com and travellerspoint.com that scour the Internet for the cheapest hotel deals. The problem with these sites though is that the cheapest ones can still be up in the \$100 margin, despite being reviewed as rat-holes.

One option is to find accommodation outside the center or to use Europe's extensive network of youth hostels. They cost anywhere from \$20 to \$50 a night and have their own self-sustaining

entertainment and are employed by a mental array of Europe's finest kids.

Or alternatively, pack a tent. More European cities are opening up camping grounds closer to the city center, and can cost as low as \$7.50 a night to pitch up a tent. Besides, the more established camping grounds have their own picnic stalls that sell food and water basics to keep Europe's culinary wasteland at bay.

Your best bet for getting around is to invest in public transport. Point-to-point ticketing is an exceptional idea that will suit anyone who will religiously abide by their itinerary. In that case, you can book them online, direct with the European train operators, anywhere from \$10 to \$150, depending on the route, and print them right off the computer screen.

For anyone who suspects they will stray from their plans, a grand selection of Eurail passes that covers a gawping array of journeys will suffice. The people at Eurail have it

covered from the "Eurail Select Pass 3 Countries" that covers you for two months with five days worth of train passes across any three countries for \$428 to another smattering selection.

For those who have at least a sketchy idea of their journey, Eurail is also selling individual passes for specific countries and regions. For example, Eurail has one pass called the Eurail Benelux pass which costs \$328 across one month in and between Belgium, The Netherlands and Luxembourg. For more passes and early bird deals to travel in the off season go to <http://www.eurail.com>. Be wary though, in some countries, mainly France and Italy, you need to book reservations, in particular when boarding high-speed or overnight trains, despite already having a pass. This can all be done online, 60-120 days in advance, or the night before. 

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