

# How To Stretch Your Dollar Through The Holidays



The end-of-year-holidays are supposed to be all about taking a break from work and spending quality time with friends and family. Unfortunately, money worries often get in the way of having a truly carefree celebration.

The pressure to spend comes from almost every angle. Visiting relatives will often mean:

- Flights
- Accommodation
- Transfers to and from the airport
- Car rental
- Gas

And if you drive to your family, it will mean gas and possibly long hours on the road in bad weather.

Your travel-related expenses might also involve pet care, such as in-home pet sitting or boarding.

Then there are the food and drink pressures. Everyone loves seasonal treats, but the excess doesn't just burst your belt, but your budget too.

Many people host meals at their homes. They also participate in a range of social activities with food as the main focus of attention, such as church suppers and potlucks. Some people feel like they can't live without decadent desserts and candy, while others like to include alcohol as an essential part of their celebrations. All of these items can make the cost of your shopping list soar.

Add to that the holiday activities. With the children out of school for a couple of weeks, they need to be entertained. This can be tough if you don't get a lot of days off work yourself. In this case, you would need to sort out childcare for the days they are out of school and all the adults are work.

No celebration would be complete without decorations. The trouble is, they can be very expensive if you opt for store-bought. The good news is that a few simple school and art and craft supplies can help you and the children decorate your home for pennies on the dollar compared to ready-made. These can also be fun projects to keep the entire family occupied if the weather outside is bad, as you make all the holiday preparations at home.

Finally, there are the gifts to consider. This is where people are likely to overspend if they don't have a list and a plan on how to pay for the presents. The last thing you want is to run up credit card bills and get stuck with interest payments long after the holiday is over.

The secret to saving at the holidays is to be as organized as possible in the months and weeks running up to Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa and so on. Making the most of the harvest season starting in September and October can help you save on food. Buying pantry items for all your baking, and purchasing gifts that are perfect for the people on your list as and when you see them, can spread out the cost of the holidays over several months, not cram it all into December.

Let's start with a look at how to save on all your holiday travel costs.

## **Saving on Holiday Travel Costs**

If you are going to travel to family and friends, or take a winter vacation, the secret to getting the best deals is to plan ahead. The earlier you book, the better chance you have of getting a good price on the flights you really want rather than the ones that are left over.

### **Who Is Going?**

Make a list of every person traveling. Then make a list of the dates you will be leaving and returning. See if you can give yourself a bit of leeway, because being flexible can lead to big savings. Also check off all airports that are good options for your location. One might be further away from your house, but have cheaper flights and perhaps even easy public transportation so you don't have to spend a fortune getting to the airport or parking at the airport while you are away.

### **Bargain Websites**

There are a range of sites that offer good airfares, and some also have affordable, all-inclusive package deals with flight, hotel (for some or all of your stay), car rental, and entrance fees to popular attractions.

Some people swear by Priceline to get big discounts, while others use Expedia or Travelocity to book their packages. Some travel experts recommend that you purchase flights at 1 AM on a Wednesday to catch any remaining discounted fares from Monday and Tuesday.

### **Keeping Down Food Costs**

Bring snacks with you to avoid the expense of costly airport food. Remember not to carry large bottles of water or full stainless-steel water bottles in your carry-on luggage, as they can be confiscated by security. Wait until you get past security to fill up.

### **Accommodation Issues**

In terms of accommodation, your relatives might have room to put you up, or you would need a hotel or motel (preferably with a kitchenette) so you could be more independent - especially if you have younger children. Another good option might be an Airbnb property near your family, if possible. This could give you some space and privacy even as you are spending time away from home. Be sure to read the sleeping specifications and the fine print. Don't take your lively toddlers to a property full of expensive antiques, for example.

### **Will You Need a Rental Car?**

Depending on where you are staying and where your family live, you may or may not need a car rental to get back and forth. In terms of airport transfers, some hotels and motels have a free courtesy bus. Taxis, Uber or Lyft might be an option, but expect them to be very busy at the holidays, and the costs can all start to add up.

### **Why Travel Insurance Can Be a Good Idea**

Finally, travel insurance is a good idea in case your plans change at the last minute for any reason, such as illness or injury. In most cases, you will not lose the price of the trip; you would

just have a rebooking fee to pay and would have to rebook within a year. Make sure you read the fine print on your airline seats, though, and on the policy.

### Driving to Your Destination

If you are driving to your relatives' houses for the holiday, you will need to budget for gas and possibly accommodation. If you live in the North, be sure to also winterize the car, put snow chains on and antifreeze in, and so on. Pack everything you would need in the event that you got stranded in bad weather — it does happen. Essentials include water, food and blankets.

### Paying for It All

In the case of travel, it is best to pay for everything on a credit card because you will often get additional insurance and other forms of consumer protection. If you use a credit card that gives you cash back, air miles, or money back through the Upromise program for college savings, these can help make your trip more affordable.

Let's look next at the cost of food and drink.

## **Cutting Food and Drink Expenses for the Holidays**

Food and drink can be one of the largest line items on your budget, especially if you are traveling or tend to have a very lively social schedule.

### Food on the Road

If you are traveling, each family member will need three meals a day plus snacks and water/beverages. Then there are the holiday meal items you are likely to contribute to as a guest in someone's home.

Use stainless water bottles for the family. If you are a member of a warehouse club such as Costco, go shopping as soon as you arrive at your destination to get the basics your family needs most and stock the kitchen for your stay.

### Luxury Items for the Holidays

The warehouses often have gift baskets and luxury food items especially for the holidays. These can make a great gift and/or contribution to the holiday meal. Some stores will also stock alcohol, so you can buy beer and wine for a fraction of what you would pay in the supermarket or a liquor store.

If you are driving to your destination, load up the car with your family favorites.

If you are staying at home, chances are you will be hosting a festive meal yourself. Finalize the guest list as far as possible beforehand, but add a few place settings just in case. Include a vegan option as well so you can cater to all tastes.

## Bring Food Contributions

If you are invited to another person's home to eat, it's customary to bring a contribution to the meal, such as a covered dish or a bottle of wine. Some meals will be potluck; the host may also request that you sign up online for what dish you will bring so they don't end up with a dozen desserts and no side dishes.

Bring a disposable pan they can heat and eat in. It's quick and easy, and you don't have to worry about getting back your favorite casserole dish.

Baking is an essential part of most holidays, with cakes, cookies and muffins galore. If you have to bake a lot for family, friends, parties with the kids at school, potlucks and so on, buy in bulk from warehouse clubs or online.

Candy making can also be a lot of fun at the holidays. There's nothing more delicious than homemade fudge. The treats from your kitchen can often make tasty and affordable gifts, if you take the trouble to wrap them nicely. Just make sure your fruitcake is light and moist, not a brick.

## Cooking Ahead

Cooking ahead can help you make the most of low food prices in the run-up to the holidays. For example, vegetables are very cheap at harvest time. There are also quite a few recipes you can make ahead and freeze. It's really just a question of how much room you have in your freezer and/or deep freeze. You could space out the cost of all your potluck contributions and side dishes in this way.

Baked goods generally freeze well also, so if you need hundreds of cookies or cupcakes for Christmas, make them in advance and store them in zippered freezer bags until needed. Take them out, decorate as desired, and impress everyone with your fabulous baking skills.

## The Cost of Alcohol

In terms of alcohol, this is very much a matter of personal preference and budget. If there will be a lot of children present, it might be best to avoid having a lot of liquor around, for example. If you do serve it, or plan to drink, be sure you have a designated driver or a plan for getting home safely. Factor in the cost of transportation if you won't be driving yourself.

It's important to try to spend quality time as a family during the holidays, which should mean focusing less on food and more on interesting activities. Let's look next at how to make these more affordable.

## **Affordable Activities**

Maybe you plan to travel to visit family over the holidays, in which case you would still have to keep the kids entertained while you are there. Or, you might go on a vacation such as skiing, a cruise, or a trip to the theme parks in Orlando, Florida. All of these will cost money, of course, but planning ahead can make them more affordable.

## Skiing

There are a number of ski resorts that are all-inclusive and family friendly. Read the fine print to make sure you are getting the best deal on activities the whole family will love.

## Cruises

Cruises are a great option because you get your transportation, accommodation, meals and entertainment all in one. Check to see what activities on board are suitable for your family members' ages and interests. Also check the ports of call carefully. Some cruises go to a variety of interesting destinations in the Caribbean and Mexico, for example, while others go to their own private island for all sorts of sporting activities.

Unless you live near a port, you might have to purchase flights in order to reach the point of departure. Check with the cruise line to see if they offer discounted air travel and free transfers to and from the ship. Note that you can sometimes also get a substantial discount for group bookings for family and friends.

## Theme Parks

Theme park holidays can be a great way to do something different other than the usual Christmas celebrations, but you will need to plan ahead. You can usually get discounts if you buy the tickets in advance online. Look for multiple day packages as well, which tend to bring the per-day price down.

## Local Deals

As for other activities, eating out, and special events, check with Groupon and similar sites to see what's available. You can usually get 50% off the regular price and it is a great way to try something new when you are on your staycation.

Check your local Pennysaver for listings of interesting upcoming activities, such as at the library, local museums, farms and so on. Most museums will have at least one free admission day each month you can make the most of.

Check parenting sites like Mommy Poppins for recommendations about age-specific things to do with your children that won't cost a lot.

## Movie Night

Going to the movies with the whole family can be a pretty expensive proposition these days. Consider streaming family-friendly videos instead for your own (holiday-themed) movie night complete with your favorite snacks. You can also subscribe to a premium channel if you wish, as long as you know the whole family will find something interesting to watch.

Amazon Prime has lots of free shows and movies, and its own original programming for people of all ages, so it is also a good option - well worth its annual fee, which gives you free shipping on almost everything you order from Amazon.

## Family Activities

Doing all the baking and candy making can be perfect activities for children. They love cutting out cookies and decorating food with frosting, sprinkles and more. Set them up with an apron and various colors and edible decorations, and see what they can come up with.

You can also learn together how to make various fun foods, such as your own personal pizzas with authentic pizza dough, or how to make bread and other items that rise using yeast.

If the weather is cold and snowy, you can head outside to build a snowman, igloo or ice fort. You can go sledding or cross-country skiing if you have the equipment for it.

You can also have a good old-fashioned spring cleaning in the winter and either sell or donate unwanted items. You'll need space to put your presents, after all.

One other obvious activity that's fun for the whole family is decorating the house for the holidays. Let's look next at ways to do this affordably.

## Ways to Decorate the House Affordably

House decorations inside and out are almost a must for the holiday, but the cost can soon add up if you're not careful. There are a number of ways to decorate affordably, especially if you are well organized and you and the children enjoy doing arts and crafts.

### Sorting, and Making a List

The first step is to take out all your decorations and organize them by holiday if they've gotten all jumbled up. The next step is to assess what you have. If it is broken, it's probably best to get rid of it. Check the lights to make sure they work. The last thing you want is a fire hazard in your home at the holidays.

### Live or Fake?

Once you see what you have, it's time to make a list of what you need or want. A lot of families favor a real wreath for the door, a real tree, and various festive plants such as poinsettias, holly, and so on.

The trouble is, they can be expensive and you will literally be throwing money away at the end of the holiday season. The pine needles can get stuck everywhere, including pet paws. Most of the greenery is treated with a range of chemicals to try to keep it fresh. The tree is also treated with chemicals, and they can leach into the water you put in your Christmas tree stand. Pets can get seriously ill if they drink that water.

Poinsettias can pose a risk if pets eat them. People who try to keep them past the holiday usually end up with a huge mess due to rotting flowers and a sticky ooze that comes out of the plant. The plants are basically supposed to be kept in the dark until you want to turn the flowers red, or else they release the goo.

For all these reasons, silk or plastic greenery might be a more affordable, safer and neater option. As for trees, there are so many gorgeous artificial ones, it is really just a case of finding one that suits your budget and lifestyle.

If you have pets and young children, the last thing you want is any glass Christmas balls dangling from a tree which people or pets can pull down or try to climb up. A table top plastic tree, or fiber optic tree, can be put up out of reach. The fiber optic trees will usually display a gorgeous range of colors, and will not need garland or a lot of fancy balls. Wooden ornaments are sustainable and can be used year after year.

Plastic wreaths are easy to buy, or to make with the help of a foam wreath form. Children can decorate them as they wish with artificial greenery and other items they can attach with a glue gun, such as ribbons, balls, glitter and more.

### Getting Crafty

Construction paper, cotton, colored pens and pencils, and blunt-edged scissors are just a few of the useful items you can give the children at a craft table where they can use their imaginations to make decorations. White paper makes great cut-out snowflakes. Printables will give them a range of images to color and use as is, or incorporate into various decorations.

Some people still send Christmas cards. You can use them as part of your décor year after year. Children can even create their own using software or free sites online and then printing them out.

A beautiful holiday table usually starts with an attractive centerpiece. Try a bowl with greenery, pinecones and holly.

### Table Décor

The children can also make colorful placemats using coloring pages and a plastic sheet protector. You can create a decorative table runner in the same way, taping the short ends together once you've inserted the colored images into the plastic sheets.

### The Mantelpiece

If you are fortunate enough to have a fireplace, you can all work on a holiday mantelpiece display with pinecones, holly, garland, Christmas stockings, and more. You could make your own stockings with various materials such as fabric or felt and personalize each so every member of the family has one. If you plan on putting anything in them, be sure you have some sturdy hooks.

If you have done all your arts and crafts and are still looking for decorations, check in August and September when the holiday displays go up. Chances are they will be cheaper than closer to the holidays.

### After Christmas Sales

If you want to be super-frugal and patient, wait until the after Christmas sales to see what you can find. Some stores, like Pier 1, offer their decorations at up to 90% off list price. Think about candles, potpourri and other small touches that make the holiday a bit brighter.



When you are heading off shopping, never go anywhere without your list of must-haves. We've talked about creating one for your decorations. Now it is time for the all-important holiday gift list.

## **Keeping Your Gift Giving Within Budget**

The most expensive items on your holiday shopping list will usually be the presents you need to buy for the people on your list. But before you go crazy, it might be time to consider some gift-giving rules.

### **The Family**

Everyone in your immediate family will expect at least one gift. The question is, how much should you spend? And is one enough? Children will start to ask you for everything they see on TV in the months leading up to the holidays, but remember, if you plan on financing a shopping spree with your credit card, your "bargains" will keep on racking up interest until you finally pay off the entire bill. It is far better to buy one or two things that will be really valued than a dozen you will have to try to find the cash to pay for.

Children aged five and over are old enough to learn lessons about money and how to manage it. They also understand about making choices. If you want to stick to your budget this year, it might be time to have these conversations with your family.

### **Budgeting**

"Budget? What budget?" we hear you ask. This is the most common mistake people make when it comes to holiday spending. You should have a budget for each of the items we have already discussed in this guide: travel, food, décor and especially gifts.

Make a list of everyone outside the family you feel you have to buy for, such as friends and work colleagues. Don't forget building staff at your office or building where you live, and the mailman. If you can afford it, estimate \$50 per person — this is less than \$1 per week for all they do for you, and many staff rely on holiday bonuses like these in order to pay for their own holidays.

If a lot of people tend to buy for each other in the office but it feels a bit awkward and expensive, suggest a Secret Santa to match up people who want to participate. Your children might practice something similar at school.

If you're good at arts and crafts and/or baking, homemade gifts could be the perfect way to give a little something to the people on your list without breaking the bank.

### **Spotting the Right Gift**

It can often be really frustrating at the holidays trying to find just the right gifts that will appeal to your loved ones. Everyone tends to have a hobby and/or strong preferences about what they would love to receive. Boys are usually interested in sports, while girls tend to love books, ponies, clothes and so on. Leaving things until the last minute might mean you come away empty-handed, or manage to find something but end up paying way more than you might have liked.

For Chanukah and Kwanzaa, you would need a little gift for every night of the celebration, so consider a variety of practical as well as fun items. Oriental Trading sells a range of cute holiday-themed items, school supplies, party favors and more, all at affordable prices.

You can shop the Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Green Monday sales. There is also Amazon's Black Friday in the summer, and Amazon Prime day on July 16th every year if you are trying to bag big bargains. By starting early, you have a better chance of getting good deals. The main thing is to check the item off the list and then stop. You'll also need some good hiding places until the holidays.

Other expenses related to gift giving include wrapping paper, tape, gift bags and gift boxes. For your own family, you could use brown craft paper and let the children create their own designs. Be sure to recycle everything once the presents have been opened.

Gift bags and tags are a good option because they can be reused either in your family, or by the person you are gifting. Don't write on the tag; tuck in a little note with the person's name, and yours in the "from" field.

### Gifting Yourself

Some people love to be surprised and receive presents. Others are more practical and might ask for a specific item from their spouse or family. Still others are really frugal and shop the after Christmas sales. After all, why pay more than you have to for something that drops in price a day or two later?

Some people even wait to see family and friends until after the holiday sales have started. This can be a bit extreme, but of course, every penny counts.

A lot of unwanted gifts do get re-gifted, so this is another viable option if the item is nice and not too obviously intended for you.

Some people donate their unwanted presents to the Salvation Army or other thrift stores, so it's possible to get some real bargains once the holidays are over.

Make your list, check it twice, and try not to be naughty when it comes to spending, and the holidays should be a lot more affordable this year provided you stick to your ground rules.

### Conclusion

The holidays can be a wonderful time of year provided that you don't feel compelled to spend a lot and feel miserable because you think you are broke. And you really will be miserable if you allow yourself to go over budget in an effort to please everyone.

Set your budgets early and pace your spending on the essentials so not all of the shopping will fall in the month of December, and you should be able to stretch your dollar further than ever.

Here's to a happy holiday season!