

## Summer Road Trip: 12 Tricks for Eating on the Cheap



Food and beverages on a road trip can really add up. Here are some easy, money-saving tips to keep you on budget when you're on the go.

Nearly 80% of American families plan to hit the road this summer, a 10% increase over last year, according to AAA. Many of us assume that a road trip will be a [budget-friendly vacation](#) idea, but the expense of meals, snacks and beverages on the road can cost more than we anticipate. We polled top travel experts and found more than a dozen ways to save on eats during your adventures on the open road this summer.

### 1. Stock up on Snacks

Travel writer Christina Valhouli avoids buying potentially overpriced snacks at gas stations and roadside convenience stores. "I stock up on snacks from my local supermarket or Costco before a trip. I make individual sized portions in Ziploc bags and pass them around the car," she said. She uses clothespins to securely close bags of snacks, as they are sturdier and less expensive than chip clips.

## 2. Snack Healthy

Lisa Scurlock, owner of Gratitude Yoga in Chicago, likes to avoid junk food when she's on the road. "I always pack protein bars, like Oatmega grass-fed whey protein bars, to keep me energized when I'm traveling to yoga retreats throughout the summer — they taste great and have tons of protein without a lot of sugar," she said. "Plus, I save money by packing a box of four bars instead of buying one at a time from pricey rest stops along the way."

## 3. Save With Apps

Sandra Hanna from SmartCookies.com recommends using the Ibotta app to look for restaurant deals. "If you're on the road and want to stop for a bite, check out Ibotta's offers for Buffalo Wild Wings or any number of restaurants available through Groupon," she said. "You could earn up to 20% cash back on Groupon just by starting with Ibotta. Then cash out via PayPal or Venmo and put some gas in the tank."

Gabe Saglie, a travel expert from Travelzoo, recommends the free Travelzoo app. "The app geo-targets your location to showcase exclusive deals at nearby restaurants," he said. "These deals — which can include everything from mimosa breakfasts to specially curated multi-course dinners — are vetted, tested, and represent significant savings."

## 4. Breakfast Included

Saglie suggested being strategic when you book your hotel. "If you're on a multi-day road trip, look for hotels where breakfast comes standard with your stay," he said. "The option to grab a meal before you hit the road again can be a big money-saver." Many hotels will feed your kids for free, or at a discount, he said. "At Fairmont hotels, for example, kids age 5 and under eat free from the children's menu, and kids ages 6 to 12 eat for half price when ordering off the regular menu. Four Seasons and Starwood/Marriott hotels have similar programs."

You'll save more if you're a member of your favorite hotel's rewards club, and even more if you have a hotel rewards credit card. If you don't already have one, keep in mind that most rewards cards require good credit to qualify. You can see where your credit stands by checking [your credit scores for free on Credit.com](#).

Valhouli favors chains like Extended Stay or Marriott's Residence Inn, because they often have kitchenettes. "You can whip up an easy breakfast or lunch in a kitchenette," she said. "One \$5 box of granola will go a long way!"

## 5. Look for Perks

Saglie suggests taking advantage of the free morning coffee service at many hotels. Some hotels also offer wine in the evenings. "Kimpton hotels offer a complimentary wine hour every day at 5 p.m., and Embassy Suites hotels feature complimentary managers' cocktail receptions, which are an effective way to save on your night out," he said.

## 6. Fill up on Coffee

Don Munsil co-owner of the vacation planning website MouseSavers.com, suggested filling a thermos with coffee before you leave the house on day one of your trip. "You can refill it at the hotel breakfast service the next morning," he said. Need more later in the day? "Places like Denny's or IHOP will usually fill your thermos for the cost of a single cup of coffee, or McDonald's will typically eyeball your thermos and charge for one or two large coffees."

## 7. Order Ahead

If you want to save time on the road, Tammilee Tilson of the Tammilee Tips blog suggests ordering snacks and other road trip essentials from the CVS Pharmacy app during breakfast while at the hotel or campground. (Here are some [handy tips for saving money at CVS.](#)) "You can use the app to access great deals through their ExtraCare Rewards Program wherever you are, and easily make your shopping list accordingly," she said. "If the local store has curbside pickup, you can quickly pick up your items on the way to your next destination."

## 8. Some Assembly Required

If you plan to stop for a picnic along the way, Munsil recommends buying sandwiches in the morning — unassembled. "To avoid soggy sandwiches, ask for them unassembled, with the filling for each one portioned out and ready to go in a plastic container, the spreads in little sealed cups and the pre-sliced rolls or bread in a bag," he said. "Stick the meats and mayo in your cooler and the bread bag in a sunny part of the car so it'll be warm."

## 9. Load up on Lunch

If you go to a restaurant for lunch, Adrian Gradinaru, founder and CEO of Sailo.com, a peer-to-peer marketplace for boat rentals, suggests making lunch the main meal of the day. "Americans favor dinner as the main meal of the day but it tends to be more expensive," he said. "Instead, try making lunch your principal meal as most people outside the U.S. do. Many restaurants offer special prix-fixe lunch menus that are a great deal."

## 10. Bring the Beverages

Valhouli's rule of thumb at hotels? Avoid the minibar. "We always pack a small, soft sided cooler in our car and stock it with juice boxes, soft drinks or wine for the adults so that we are never tempted to hit the overpriced minibar," she said. Her only use for the minibar is to refreeze her ice packs overnight.

## 11. Get Gift Certificates

The Costco or Sam's Club websites often offer discounted restaurant gift cards to their members from major chains like Landry's and Darden's, Munsil said. "Sometimes the gift cards will appear to be for a specific restaurant, but usually that card will work at any restaurant owned by that chain," he said.

He also suggested planning your evening stops in decent-sized towns and checking a site like Restaurant.com for gift certificates to local restaurants. Larger towns are more likely to have participating restaurants. You can also check out [tips for slicing your restaurant food costs.](#)

## 12. Eat With the Locals

Gradinaru suggests staying away from touristy hot spots. "Instead, venture into more residential neighborhoods, where you'll likely find some excellent and cheap establishments," he said. He also suggests asking around. "Concierges tend to recommend pricier restaurants near your hotel, so try asking a waiter, bartender or your host (if you are staying in an Airbnb), where they like to eat. They'll likely give you some great options," he said.