

BE YOUR OWN

# Tour Guide

Follow these steps to take charge of your own vacation plans.

By TAYLOR GAINES

## MAKE UP YOUR MIND

Indecisiveness and inability to pull the trigger will absolutely cripple your vacation before it even gets started.

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"You've gotta pick somewhere," said Norman Lewis, as associate professor at the University of Florida and a seasoned traveler who has been all over the world. "Otherwise you go nowhere."

As one popular travel blog, Nomadic Matt, puts it, "A lot of people talk vaguely about travel. They never say where they are going, just that they are going."

The best and quickest way to speed up your decision-making process is to focus on what you are looking for in a vacation.

Pick a place that fits your needs. If you're looking to relax on a beach and get some sun during your winter vacation, New York City probably isn't the place to go. Similarly, if you want to visit ancient ruins and world-renowned art museums, the Caribbean Islands probably won't be your cup of tea.

"Different people are going to have different priorities," Lewis said. "Know what's valuable to you and try to do those things."

Economically, the travel blog Thrifty Nomads recommends thinking about which places might fit your budget by looking into currency rates, off-season travel and special deals. We'll talk more about budgeting specifically for your trip later.

The most important thing to do is to not get stuck thinking that 10 different places would be great for your vacation. Make a choice, and stick to it. Otherwise, you'll never end up on vacation at all.



## CALIBRATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS & PLAN YOUR TRIP

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First, here's something that might be tough to swallow.

"You are not going to see or experience everything in one trip," said Lewis, who has made 10 trips abroad and been to 13 different countries. "Don't try to worry about it. Live your life expecting that you'll go back."

Not understanding this truth can lead many travelers to over-planning, or worse, setting their expectations so high that they will inevitably be disappointed.

Lewis said he tries to focus on enjoying the things he does rather than worry about the things he won't have time for. On multiple trips to Paris, he has been to the famous museum The Louvre eight times. It took seven trips just to see the whole thing, and he said he's gotten something completely different out if every time.

It is important to translate this mindset into your day-to-day vacation planning.

"The biggest mistake people make is trying to do too many things in a day," Lewis said.

Jen and Ted Avery, who run the popular travel blog Thrifty Nomads, said another way to cut costs and stress during travel is by being flexible in your planning.

They would know. They've been living nomadically for two and a half years.

"A general plan is good, but over-planning can be costly and stressful if you schedule every day and hour to a T," Jen said in an email interview. "For instance, not being fixed on particular restaurants for every meal provides the ability to eat cheaper at local Mom & Pop shops or street markets (which often have the best food anyway)."

To find things to do, look at some of the most trusted travel guides on the web. Lewis and many travel blogs recommend RickSteves.com, LonelyPlanet.com and TripAdvisor.com for finding great places to eat, stay and spend time all around the world.

The easiest thing to do is use all three sources and to compare and contrast the information you come up with. You'll have tons of ideas in no time.

You sit at your computer, staring at the screen. You scroll through page after page of flight options, restaurant recommendations and adventurous excursions.

Egypt. Japan. Puerto Rico. The world is full of amazing, beautiful places.

So where do you go? How do you get there? What do you do once you arrive? The questions are endless. The daunting task of answering them all is enough to stop someone from going on vacation all together.

Vacation planning doesn't have to be this way. It doesn't

have to exist in a realm where you constantly dream of the countless sights the world has to offer and never actually attempt to visit them.

You can make your fantasy vacation actually happen. And you can do it all on your own. Follow these guidelines and you will be able to pull off the trip of a lifetime. With five easy steps, you can become your own travel agent.

### BALANCE YOUR BUDGET

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It gives many travelers peace of mind to know how much their vacation is probably going to cost before they embark on the journey. Others prefer closing their eyes, holding their nose and taking the plunge, then checking the damage when they return home.

Regardless, there are simple ways to ensure you don't spend more money than you need to. There is a balance to the travel, lodging, eating and adventurous aspects of your vacation. Figure out which things are important for you to spend money on.

Lewis likes to budget the most money for cultural experiences while making up the balance in things like food and lodging.

"For some people, cuisine is important," he said. "That's a great experience, but that's not personally my goal. I love to experience local culture in various forms. Art, museums, talking to people."

Also, just because you are spending less in certain areas does not mean you are decreasing your odds of making great memories.

For example, Lewis once spent the night watching Champions League soccer in a hostel on a Scottish countryside, surrounded by passionate soccer fans. It was weird and unexpected, but it's something he'll always remember.

"I never would have had that in a hotel," he said. "Often the things you end up remembering the most are those experiences that didn't cost you very much."

Practically, Lewis said, you should also always try to use public transportation, if available. An airline credit card with rewards can be useful for saving money on flights as well.

When it comes to booking flights, travel experts are somewhat at odds. The consensus among travel blogs seems to be that the sooner you order tickets, the cheaper, but flight prices also fluctuate randomly throughout the year.

Make a spreadsheet, lay out your budget, and then prepare for the unexpected.



### DOT YOUR I'S AND CROSS YOUR T'S

4

Speaking of the unexpected, there are a lot of things you need to do while traveling that might not even cross your mind.

For example, take international travel. You need to tell your credit card company you are going abroad so they don't shut your card down. You need to make sure all of your upcoming bills are paid or set to be paid. You also need to decide what to do with your cell phone.

People have come to rely on their cell phones for communication and navigation, Lewis said. You need to decide whether using paper maps works for you or whether you want to pay roaming charges to make calls.

Domestically or internationally, there is one thing Lewis swears by in his travels.

"Pack light. Pack light. Pack light," he said. "The realization every traveler makes is you really can live without all that stuff and you'll be fine."

Lewis recommends packing enough clothes for six days' worth and washing them in your sink or tub every night before hanging-drying.

"Nobody ever regrets packing light," he said. "Everybody regrets packing heavy."

Jen backed up that sentiment. She said even the most seemingly remote places will have a place to buy items you may have forgotten to pack.

"When you pack, revisit your pile over and over again," she said. "It will be easier to cut down when you can look at the pile with fresh eyes."

Also consider packing small, helpful items such as a reusable water bottle, hand sanitizer or lip balm. And don't forget your phone charger or travel documents.

**Pack light. Pack light.  
Pack light. ... Nobody  
ever regrets packing light.  
Everybody regrets  
packing heavy.**

— Norman Lewis, associate professor at the University of Florida and a seasoned traveler



**SOAK IT IN**

Look, we've all been on vacation with people who are so set on completing their checklist that they forget to enjoy the trip itself.

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Don't force yourself to take a million pictures. Don't try to cover every inch of every tourist attraction. Vacation is not for getting stressed out. Sit back, really take it all in and enjoy yourself.

"Be present in each moment as it happens," Jen said. "Concentrate on the sights, sounds, scents and scenery around you. Before you know it, you'll be back home wishing you were on that trip!"

Take this example about people visiting museums from Professor Lewis.

"Most people spend no more than seven seconds looking at a painting," he said. "I'm going to stop and spend 30 seconds studying something and looking at it from different angles."

Take that to heart. Soak it all in. Remember, you're not going to get to see and do everything on one trip.

"You're in this fabulous place," Lewis says. "Just stare and enjoy it."



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