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## Strategies for coping with weak dollar

With the dollar at a twenty year low against the British Pound (and at historic lows against the Euro) its important to stretch your dollars as far as you can when traveling abroad

A waiter picks up an ash tray from a table, right, as a customer leaves euro coins on the table to pay for an order at a Paris cafe

By **Beth J. Harpaz**

The Associated Press

Updated: 5:45 p.m. ET March 25, 2004

NEW YORK - Texas college student Cheryl Halbert experienced sticker shock on a visit to Rome in early March. "We've spent so much on where we are staying and what we eat that I'll be working all summer to pay it back," said Halbert, 19, who was traveling with Andrea Schweikhard, a fellow student at Abilene Christian University in San Antonio.

Even a half-liter bottle of mineral water cost more than twice the 75 cents the young women would normally pay back home — two euros, or about \$1.60.

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her friend, many Americans heading to Europe as prime travel season gets under way will be disheartened by how little a dollar buys. The euro hit a five-year-high against the dollar in

February, trading at \$1.29, although it was down slightly to \$1.24 in early March. But as recently as mid-2002, the euro was worth just 88 cents. That means in two years, European vacations have gotten more than 40 percent more expensive for Americans.

But experts say there are plenty of ways to make the best of a lousy exchange rate — from getting all-inclusive package deals, to choosing destinations in eastern rather than western Europe, to using discount airlines and train passes for local travel.

Linda Teter, director for American Express Travel, notes that despite the weak dollar, “we have seen very, very strong demand for European travel, particularly for peak travel periods in spring and summer. There's a lot of pent-up demand” from travelers who postponed trips in the last three years due to concerns about terrorism and a weak domestic economy. In January alone, American Express' European cruise and tour sales were up by double digits over the same period in 2003.

### Go East, young traveler

Amy Ziff, editor-at-large for the online company Travelocity, has also seen strong demand, with European trips comprising a 30 percent larger share of all Travelocity bookings this season compared to a year ago. And while Paris, London and Rome remain Travelocity's top three European destinations, bookings to eastern Europe —where hotels, food and amenities are cheaper — are on the rise. The May 1 addition of 10 new countries to the European Union — the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, as well as Cyprus and Malta — may further raise their profiles among bargain-hunting vacationers.

Nancy Dunnan, editor of TravelSmart newsletter, agrees that budget travelers should consider venturing outside the most popular — and most expensive — European cities. “Prague and Cracow are such beautiful medieval cities,” she said. “I can't imagine anyone being disappointed.”

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**Taboo luxuries**

Smart consumers will also stay away from luxury items that were cheap when the dollar was strong but are bargains no more. On a visit to Paris in January, New Yorker Susan Gray purchased a Chanel No. 5 purse-size refill for \$88 — exactly what U.S. retailers charge for the same item over the Internet. And Alison Brod, who owns a Manhattan public relations company, has decided to forgo her twice-annual shopping trips to Europe. She remembers visiting a European Gucci store several years ago that “was like a giant flea market — everything was 45 percent off!” But these days, she buys her European designer items on eBay.

**Bundling it all up**

Dunnan, Teter and Ziff all recommend package deals as the best way to get the most for your weak dollar. Because package organizers book a large volume of trips, they get better rates than you can.

“A package can be as simple as a series of hotel nights; some will include transfers from the airport to the hotel; some will include continental breakfast,” said Teter. An additional benefit, she notes: “You’re buying that package in U.S. dollars” at a locked-in rate.

While Dunnan and Teter say the best packages are found through travel agents, Ziff says consumers can increasingly build their own packages through the Internet.

**Europe by boat**

Cruises are also a good option. “You fly to a point in Europe, spend a week or two on board a ship. Your meals are included, transfers are included. You are covering the majority of your expenses before you leave home,” said Teter.

But Dunnan advises looking at the terms for sightseeing at ports of call before booking passage. In some cases, excursions can add hundreds of dollars to your cruise cost; in other cases, you can simply borrow a bicycle from the ship and tour the local villages on your own.

Among the ports of call on a 14-day Holland America cruise sailing July 27 from Copenhagen are Oslo, Dover, LeHavre, Lisbon, Barcelona, Monte Carlo and Dubrovnik, with daylong stopovers in each. Scenery on the cruise route includes the Rock of Gibraltar, the Stromboli volcano and Mount Etna. Fares for inside

staterooms, not including airfare from New York, begin at well under \$2,500 per person, double occupancy.

But you will pay extra for sightseeing when the ship docks. In Barcelona, for example, a \$37 excursion from the Holland America cruise focuses on tours of Antoni Gaudi's works, while a \$33 tour for cruise guests includes Barcelona's Gothic Quarter and the Picasso Museum.

**Getting around and about**

If you're visiting more than one city or country, compare your transportation options. If you're traveling with others, sharing a rental car might cost less than train tickets for everyone. But be prepared for fast, aggressive drivers, and of course, signs in another language. And remember that standard-shift cars are the norm in Europe.

For train travel, Eurail still offers the classic Youthpass for those under 26 (\$414, 15 days, good in 17 countries). Other deals include the Saverpass, for two or more people traveling together (\$498 per person, 15 days, 17 countries) and a Selectpass good for any combination of three, four or five adjoining countries. Kids age 4 to 11 can get half-price passes. But you must buy your pass before you go overseas.

New European discount airlines like Ryanair, Spanair, Air Berlin and EasyJet offer flights as low as \$30 to \$40 between major cities. But Wendy Perrin, editor at Conde Nast Traveler, cautions in the magazine's March issue that "low-fare carriers work only if you have a couple of hours to spare. You need to factor in the trip to and from the airport, possibly long check-in queues, and strict check-in deadlines." In other words, Europe's high-speed trains — which often connect cities at 150 mph — are sometimes faster.

**FACT FILE Coping with the weak dollar**



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If you're traveling to Europe, here are some strategies for coping with the weak dollar from the editor of TravelSmart newsletter, Nancy Dunnan.

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### Don't pass on the passes

Save money on museums and cultural sites by checking out days and times where admission is free or reduced, and by looking into passes that provide admission to multiple sites. BritRail's Great British Heritage Pass is good at more than 600 historic homes, castles, gardens and ruins, including Windsor Castle and Kensington Palace in London, the Roman Baths in Bath, Edinburgh Castle in Scotland and Bodnant Gardens in Wales. A pass good for four consecutive days is \$35.

A Paris Museum Pass — \$22.50 for one day, \$42 for three days — provides admission to 70 museums and monuments. Many sites, including the Louvre and Versailles, charge around \$9.25 at current exchange rates, so the pass pays for itself after a few stops.

### Other money saving tips

Use common sense about daily necessities, just as you would if you were home. Don't eat in restaurants three times a day if you're on a budget. Grab a muffin or croissant from a bakery and a piece of fruit from a market for breakfast. For lunch, buy a hunk of cheese and bread. Get a tart or truffle to go from a chocolaterie instead of ordering dessert in a restaurant. Take subways and buses instead of cabs, and buy passes that allow you unlimited use of public transportation.

Avoid currency exchange services, like the kiosks found in airports and train stations. Experts say even teller's windows at banks don't give the best deals anymore. "You get the best rate with ATMs," Dunnan said.

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**Avoid currency exchange services, like the kiosks found in airports and train stations. Experts say even teller's windows at banks don't give the**

Finally, if you can take your trip in the offseason, you'll save a bundle. Paris in January and London in November — that's

## best deals anymore

when you can find bargains. Round-trip fares this past winter to Europe have been as low as \$190, but Ziff says “you'll be getting a great deal if you get plane fare for under \$400” come the warm weather.

Ziff adds that there will be few last-minute bargains to popular destinations in peak season. “If you're traveling to Europe this summer, buy early; buy now,” she said. “Don't wait too long, thinking you're going to get a better deal.”

## Hotel savings hints

By Gary Lee, *The Washington Post*



Check the chains. Some major chains have discounts on European lodging. Choice Hotels International has a great special of 25 to 50 percent off rooms at select properties throughout Western and Eastern Europe until the end of June. That includes doubles at the Comfort Hotel's Fruehling Am Zoo in Berlin, reduced from \$120 to \$90. In Lisbon, doubles with kitchenettes at the Clarion Suites are down from \$125 to \$93.75 a night. Early booking is recommended, as the discounted rooms sell out quickly.



Don't forget B&Bs. In an attempt to lure visitors from the United States, some B&Bs are featuring special deals for the American market. U.S. European Bed and Breakfast, a B&B service with upscale offerings all over London (800-872-2632, [www.londonbandb.com](http://www.londonbandb.com)), is charging Americans \$160 per night for doubles that would usually go for \$180. For London-bound travelers on a stricter budget, the London Bed & Breakfast Agency ([www.londonbb.com](http://www.londonbb.com)) offers doubles as cheap as \$80 per night. But remember that many of them are in outlying neighborhoods.



Check European hotel sites. Novotel, a French-owned chain, has some sharp discounts. A double at the Dorint Novotel in Munich has been reduced from \$140 to \$80 a night when booked through the company's Web site, [www.novotel.com](http://www.novotel.com). Room rates in Barcelona, London and at other European properties have also been slashed. The discounts are part of a campaign to promote certain European properties.

Other hefty savings are available through Venere.com, an online Rome hotel agency, for rooms throughout Italy and elsewhere in Europe. And the London agency Midas Hotel Network ([www.midashotels.co.uk](http://www.midashotels.co.uk)) has some particularly good deals in England for budget travelers. Doubles at the two-star Enrico Hotel in London are advertised on the Web site for \$71 a night.

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