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Places to stay if your homeless

6 second take: Being homeless doesn't need to mean living in a shelter or on the streets — there are alternative places to stay. When I use the word homeless, many people assume the worst. They envision someone sleeping in a box underneath a highway overpass, a rugged individual begging on the side of the road, or a man passed out on a park bench. But housing (or the lack thereof) for homeless people tends to be a bit more complicated than our stereotyped imaginations. Though situations similar to these do occur in big metropolitan cities with large indigent populations, many cases of homelessness are not like that at all. Of the 560,000 homeless people in America, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, many don't necessarily involve living on the streets. Rather, it means that they lack a permanent dwelling — the keyword here being permanent. My family's experiences with homelessness were unique in their own way — I was 10 years old when my family and I moved into Paducah Cooperative Ministry's homeless shelter in Kentucky, the first time we became homeless. On the day we arrived, I stayed in the car and wouldn't come out for at least an hour. I just sat there and cried. I was old enough to understand what was going on, but I didn't know how to handle it. It was emotionally jarring for me because I wanted to think there was something I could have done to stop the situation, even though I knew that there really wasn't. Visit Our List of Best Debt Relief Companies Get a Free Consultation Our Experience Living in a Homeless Shelter Living in the shelter was an interesting experience, to say the least. To a certain extent, it was like living in a dorm at college. At the shelter we moved into, there were two families who shared everything: a kitchen, a bathroom, and a common area, though each family had its own bedroom. In my family, it was myself, my mom, and my two little sisters. Each of us slept on a twin mattress on the floor. We had to put most of our possessions in storage, but we brought some cooking utensils, pans, and a few plates and cups with us. There was no cable television or internet — just an old tube TV with an antenna, which was good for news and weather. We were living with the bare essentials. We were required to attend weekly meetings. The parents went into one room, and the children into another. People were assigned to watch over the kids — mentors essentially, including one who I believe was a child psychologist. They were all volunteers that we could look up to and talk about things with. It was a pretty neat experience. I became close to one of the volunteers, Don, through our mutual love of anything with an engine. My family and I lived in the shelter for nearly three months. During that time, we came to know the other families — some were good company, and some were not. Regardless, we learned to live alongside one another, regardless of whether or not we liked them. The experience wasn't as bad as you would imagine. It wasn't as if we were living in a tenement, but it wasn't a life of luxury either. Living in the homeless shelter, we had a place to stay, a roof over our heads, and air-conditioning. We were provided with meals from the shelter's food bank. This gave us the chance to save up some money to get back on our feet while we received assistance in finding a permanent place to live. Shop and Deliver Groceries on Your Own Schedule Sign Up Now We were also signed up for government programs to make living in poverty a bit more bearable — and to help us eventually get out of it. Challenges of Living in a Shelter It was a difficult time for me, especially, being at the age when sleepovers with friends were common. Friends would ask to come over, and I would have to say no. But going to a friend's house was like a vacation to me. The biggest challenge of the homeless shelter, though, was actually getting in. Most shelters in my home city and the surrounding area are filled and stay that way. Unfortunately, this is the case across much of the United States, especially in more urban areas where homelessness is a much larger problem. Homeless shelters do not have the capacity or resources to meet the needs of the homeless population, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness. It's also difficult to get into a shelter at all if you're a single man, as many shelters accept only pregnant women or families with children. Managing Multiple Periods of Homelessness It didn't end there, though — my family endured our second bout of homelessness several years ago, when we were forced out of our home by our landlord, who refused to fix a rotting bathroom floor and a flooding basement, among other problems. Fortunately I was older and working this time around. I had received my income tax refund a few days before we were required to be out of our home. I had us covered — or so I thought. Get the Most out of Your Refund File Personal Taxes Today Before any of this happened, we had been searching for months for a new rental home that was within our budget. We were itching to get out of that place. We looked far and wide — within a 60-mile radius — with no luck. Three-bedroom homes were just too expensive in our area, and we weren't alone in finding affordable housing. About 18.5 percent of Kentucky's population lives in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, my family included. We began to consider what we had hoped we'd never have to do: move into a two-bedroom home. The three-bedroom homes that we'd lived in for as long as I could remember were a squeeze for four people. Now we would be moving into a new place with 30 percent less living space. Where to Stay When Homeless: Finding Places While I thought I had us covered with my tax return, in reality, I didn't. We moved into a hotel for a few days until we found the rental. It was supposed to be a short stay that was within our budget. It turns out that living in a hotel room — even a modest one — is quite expensive. After three weeks, my funds were nearly depleted. We were on the verge of living in our car. I decided to start a GoFundMe page. After a few days, I garnered \$750 in donations, which was enough to see us through little more than another week. After a month of living in a hotel room, we found a place that we thought would work. My mom started working for a local nonprofit to help cover part of the security deposit on our new place, and eventually we moved. It was a two-bedroom home, and even so, it cost almost 40 percent of my mom's monthly income. We knew we would have to find things to cut back on in our budget. It was going to be tough, but we knew we could make do as we had so many times before. Save and Manage Your Money With Setting Up Budgets, Savings Goals and More Start With a Free Download Where to Find Housing Help for the Homeless For families in our situation, there are a number of online and in-person resources available to find temporary shelter while building toward a permanent solution, so that you don't have to worry about draining your funds on hotels. "There are several free resources that homeless individuals can use to find temporary refuge or shelter," says higher education scholar and social justice advocate Terrell L. Strayhorn. "For instance, there is a phone directory of shelters and centers — to access the list, interested parties should dial 800-HOMELESS." This allows individuals access to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's coordinated entry system, which provides materials resources for individuals facing housing insecurity. "There's also 211 information, which provides assessment services — to access, call 211 or 866-698-6155, or text your zip code to 898211," adds Strayhorn. Online, individuals and families can utilize the National Homeless Shelter Directory, search for Transitional Housing in their state, look for shelters and affordable housing via ShelterListings.org and USA.gov, or seek out their local Office of Housing and Urban Development. Additionally, homeless or housing-insecure Americans seeking health services or affordable food can do so through the Health Resources and Services Administration database and food pantry directory respectively. The Bottom Line If you find yourself facing homelessness, it can seem like an unwinnable scenario. By taking advantage of nationwide and local organizations, you can ensure a roof over your head while building toward a more secure tomorrow. Use the National Homeless Shelter Directory to seek out government representatives who can help you find somewhere to sleep at night. If you succeed in finding a shelter, start a GoFundMe to help you get back on your feet. If not, make sure to check out the links above or call 800-HOMELESS. Living in a homeless shelter isn't the most comfortable thing in the world, but it's better than sleeping in hotels or in a car, and it's a great way to help you recover from your current struggle to move onto the next stage of your life. Optimize Your Resume and Find a Job That Accommodates Your Lifestyle Sign Up Today and Get Started Whether you know someone who is homeless, or you're dealing with this situation yourself, knowing where to go for help can make all the difference in finding shelter, food and health care services. Fortunately, several non-profit organizations and government programs offer resources to help. If you need housing for a limited time, TransitionalHousing.org has a list of more than 5,460 housing shelters. You can view the location and photos of each available shelter online. Some also offer drug and alcohol treatment support, while others are geared for women and children. The Salvation Army has locations across the country that offer emergency shelter and transitional living centers that include a safe place to sleep, food and work programs. Search the Volunteers of America website for affordable housing locations by city and state or zip code. HUD provides a page with local homeless assistance programs by state. A partial list of community action agencies in the United States is also available through the National Community Action Partnership Veterans can get help from the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program. It works with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide housing vouchers and case management support to help a veteran find a place to live while he gets back on his feet. To qualify, the veteran must meet income and health care eligibility requirements. Contact the HUD-VASH office near you. The National Runaway Switchboard has a confidential hotline, e-mail and chat feature to help homeless teens find resources and help get them safely off the street. The website also offers a forum for teens who are not yet ready to take the next step to go back home. Obtaining financial assistance to find temporary housing on your own usually requires applying for disability to show why you're unable to work or pay rent. Programs include Social Security Disability Insurance or Supplemental Security Income. Another option is to apply for reduced rent housing, or Section 8, through the HUD. On the website you meet gross income and family size requirements, the government pays some of the rental fee directly to apartment owners, and you are charged reduced rent for the balance each month. To apply, contact your local Public Housing Agency. The latest travel tips, often the-beaten-path experiences, and inspiration delivered to your inbox. According to data from ValuePenguin, the average traveler spends 21% of their total international travel budget and 26% of their total domestic travel budget on lodging. Among travelers who do pay for lodging, that works out to \$2,158 spent on hotels and other accommodations each year. Reading through ValuePenguin's data, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that just 42% of surveyed travelers reported paying for lodging at all. Some 58% of all travelers stayed for free: with friends, family, or vetted strangers. Even if you lack a global network of family and friends willing to put you up for the night, you can do plenty to reduce your lodging costs anywhere in the world. In this guide, we'll break down the top tips and best practices to find cheap: Hotels Hostels Homeswaps and short-term rentals Campsites How to Find Cheap Hotels 1. Use Booking Sites to Get the Lay of the Land Once you decide where you're headed and when, visit a few online travel booking sites to get the lay of the land. For hotels, some favorites include: Hotels.com Kayak.com Booking.com Hotwire.com Expedia Trivago.com There are plenty of others, including some niche sites mentioned below. Aggregator sites like Kayak and Trivago are particularly valuable because they round up and filter options from dozens or hundreds of single-source booking sites. Don't get me wrong: You don't have to book through these booking sites, and you probably shouldn't on your first search. At this stage, you're still in fact-finding mode. 2. Set Price Alerts Well in Advance Next, set price alerts for your date-destination combinations on every booking site that offers them. Legitimate booking and aggregator sites generally limit alerts to a couple of alerts per combination per week, so the added email volume shouldn't be overwhelming. Just remember to check your email suite's promo folder regularly. If you're using mobile apps, try push or in-app notifications instead. 3. Learn About Pricing Patterns in Your Destination Use booking sites and reputable travel guides from sources like Lonely Planet and Fodor's to bone up on weekly and seasonal pricing patterns in your destination. Of particular concern is the discrepancy between weekday and weekend hotel pricing, which can be significant. Cities that attract lots of business travelers, like New York and Washington, D.C., often see higher hotel pricing during the week compared with more touristy cities like Orlando and Miami. Seasonal factors matter too. In seasonal destinations, hotel prices can fall dramatically during the off-season — sometimes by 50% or more relative to periods of peak demand. If you're willing to brave a sweltering June in Phoenix or a soggy rainy season in Costa Rica, you'll stay for a lot less. 4. Travel Saturday Through Monday Skipping Friday night pays off handsomely in major cities that attract a diverse mix of business and leisure travelers, such as Boston. Leisure tourists arrive in waves on Friday afternoon and evening, even as some business travelers stick around for a hard-earned night off in an unfamiliar city before clearing out on Saturday morning. Their replacements don't arrive until Monday morning, by which time weekend tourists are long gone. 5. Look Outside the City Center... If you're not willing to pay a premium to stay in a prime location, don't. Pound for pound, centrally located hotels cost more than lodgings on the outskirts of town. In major cities, the difference can be stark. Years ago, on a trip to Barcelona, three friends and I saved about \$50 per night between us simply by choosing a basic budget hotel 10 or 12 subway stops from the main tourist area. That was before the era of sophisticated travel booking sites; I suspect we'd find an even better deal today. 6. ...But Be Sure to Factor in Transportation Costs and Time Lost to Travel Staying in peripheral neighborhoods isn't always the fiscally responsible play. You need to factor in the financial and temporal costs of travel to and from centrally located attractions, especially if your home base isn't well-served by low-cost public transit. Travelers staying in peripheral locations tend to spend more on transportation to and from the city center, especially when they rely on taxis and rideshare. 7. Book Through a Cash-Back Website or Plug-In Before you book through a booking website or aggregator, hit up your favorite cash-back website or use a cash-back plug-in. You'll earn a slice of those booking websites' affiliate commissions, which can range from 4% to 15% — substantially reducing your final travel costs. Most cash-back plug-ins and websites let you take straight cash payouts. Some offer Amazon vouchers and other cash-like considerations. Popular plug-ins include Rakuten and Giving Assistant. If you have solid credit, consider complementing your cash-back plug-in with a cash-back credit card that earns anywhere from 1% to 2% on every dollar spent. Check out our roundup of the best cash-back credit cards on the market for ideas. 8. Negotiate Directly With the Hotel Don't put all your eggs in the aggregator basket. In fact, don't book online at all — at least, not before trying this trick. After reading through user reviews on popular booking sites and narrowing down your list of potential hotels, call each place directly and see if you can't get a better-than-advertised deal. These are plentiful because you're essentially cutting out the middleman — the aggregator — and ensuring the hotel doesn't have to pay a fee to compete on those platforms. This practice is the inverse of showrooming, wherein consumers in search of deals on electronics or fashion clothing scope out the selection at brick-and-mortar stores before placing online orders with lower-cost resellers. 9. Look for Coupons and Limited-Time Deals The travel space is awash in coupons and limited-time deals. If your travel dates and destinations are flexible, and you're not picky about your hotel brand or location, you'll almost certainly be able to snag a 10%-plus discount to the advertised price. You can also try sites, social feeds, and newsletters devoted solely to hotel or travel deals. I'm partial to Hotelcoupons.com and Smarter Travel, which aggregate "hand-picked" deals. Bear in mind that this trick mainly works for independent hotels and small chains, not big marques like Marriott and Hilton. They may also come with restrictions like minimum length-of-stay requirements or caps on total savings. 10. Take Advantage of Membership Pricing If you're a member of a national association like AAA or AARP, you qualify for special membership pricing at thousands of name-brand hotels in the U.S. and Canada. These discounts can range from 5% to 15%, depending on the property, brand, and association. They're great for filling in the gaps in aggregator-sponsored coupons, which generally don't apply to name-brand hotels. If you prefer to stay in name-brand hotels, this is something to keep in mind. And remember that association membership has plenty of other benefits too. For instance, if you're into road-tripping, AAA's free roadside assistance is sure to come in handy at some point. Combine one free tow and a couple of discounted hotel nights each year and you're virtually certain to stay ahead of AAA's annual membership fee, which ranges from about \$60 to about \$130, depending on tier and chapter. How to Find Cheap Hostels 11. Stick to the Basics You don't stay in a hostel because you want to be waited on hand and foot. You stay in a hostel because you need a cheap, reasonably clean home base in an unfamiliar place. Even in prime sections of expensive cities like London and Paris, beds in basic hostels rarely cost more than \$30 or \$40 per night — a fraction of the cost of two-star hotel rooms nearby. Skip hostels with lots of amenities and value-added services. You don't need an onsite pool or sauna unless you're specifically seeking such perks. You do want to know what you're getting into ahead of time though. Some bargain-basement hostels literally provide beds only. They expect their guests to provide or pay for everything else. If it's not clear from the booking website, give them a call. (Use a VOIP communication app like WhatsApp or Skype for international calls.) 12. Settle for a Shared Room Again, hostels aren't meant to be palaces of luxury. If your desire to save money outweighs your wariness about sharing personal space with strangers, I'd strongly encourage you to stay in a shared hostel room. You'll save anywhere from 30% to 80% relative to the cost of a separate room, which may or may not have its own private bathroom anyway. Yes, safety is an issue. If your hostel offers secure lockers, grab one — the daily rental fee is likely to be less than the premium you'd pay for a separate, secure room. If you're concerned about unwanted advances or violations of your personal space, travel with a friend and familiarize yourself in advance with public safety resources in your destination. Oh, and make sure you're prepared for an environment over which you have complete control. Consider packing an eye mask and earplugs to fend off late-night light and noise. 13. Think Outside the Box Some "hostels" exist in name only. If you're bored of the traditional urban hostel or planning to travel to remote countryside areas where standard hostels are few and far between, consider staying with a religious order. You don't have to be religious to enjoy your stay. In many cases, you don't even have to attend religious services — although some monasteries and convents do require guests' presence at daily worship sessions. Convents and monasteries exist everywhere: stunningly beautiful corners of rural North America, Old World villages and city centers, even upscale American suburbs. The Hartford Courant has a nice roundup of traveler-friendly monasteries and convents in the United States. USA Today has a European primer, with step-by-step instructions for first-timers. Monastery Stays is an online booking site focusing mainly on Italian monasteries, of which there are plenty. Cast aside any illusions you may harbor about religious orders. Monasteries and convents can be drab places, and it goes without saying that discretion and modesty rule the day. (Yes, some monks brew their own beer, but don't expect wild parties every night.) And be open to the possibility of volunteering time and effort around the property: cleaning, gardening, schlepping. Your hosts might be happy to have you stay for much less than the cost of a comparable hotel room, but they may expect you to work for it. You Might Also Like Looking for a remote countryside destination that appears ripped from the pages of a children's globe? Check out our guide to the top attractions and sights in Jungfrau, Switzerland, one of the Alps' most scenic areas. Then review our guide to nearby Zurich, the de facto capital of Swiss finance. How to Find Cheap Home Swaps and Short-Term Rentals 14. Tap Your Extended Network for Cheap or Free Homestays Unless you're blessed with a globe-trotting group of friends and acquaintances, you won't personally know someone in every destination you visit. In truly out-of-the-way destinations, your immediate network is apt to be nonexistent. Maybe it's time to expand your definition of "network." Cast about for friends-of-friends and friends-of-colleagues in far-flung parts of the country or world. You might be surprised at the extent of your reach — and how easy it is to score cheap or free housing in exchange for a favor or two. It goes without saying that you need to trust the people brokering these connections. And the same common-sense safety rules apply here as at hostels around the world. Familiarize yourself with local public safety resources in advance and be ready to change your plans should anything feel off. 15. Use a Legitimate Peer-to-Peer Network When you reach the limits of your extended network, try a peer-to-peer network like Couchsurfing. In their infancy, these networks had deservedly risky reputations, but they've gotten serious about safety in recent years. If privacy is a serious concern, you can always limit your search to properties where hosts won't be physically present. That said, many travelers experience couch surfing's inherent sociability as a feature, not a bug. Incidentally, couch surfing is a great way to reduce food costs on the road. Saving money at restaurants is a major concern for frugal travelers, and couch surfing may let you skip the restaurant meals entirely. 16. Look for Cost-Effective Extended Stays If couch surfing isn't open-ended enough for your needs, look for cost-effective extended stays through home-swap platforms like HomeExchange.com. Home swaps are favored by adventurous travelers and folks who spend weeks or months at vacation homes, leaving their primary residences available, and vice versa. Home swaps are conducive to long, leisurely stays in a single destination: sabbaticals, writing retreats, or interludes between jobs or freelance projects. 17. Try Housesitting If you're willing to tend to someone else's castle while they're gallivanting around the world, use a housesitting platform like MindMyHouse to make arrangements. In most cases, you'll have free reign over the place in exchange for manageable house- and pet-sitting duties. Just be sure to confirm the extent of your expected duties well in advance, so that you're not blindsided by extra obligations. The arrangement may not be worth the trouble if you won't have any time to explore your destination. How to Find Cheap Campsites 18. Try Car Camping "Car camping" usually refers to drive-in campsites. But hatchbacks, station wagons, crossovers, and SUVs can comfortably accommodate at least two sleepers laying down — minus the campsite. All that's required to turn your vehicle into a mini-camper is a fold-down back seat or driver and passenger seats that fully recline, and a place to post up legally for a few hours. Highway rest areas and park-and-ride lots generally fit the bill. In some jurisdictions, so do on- and off-ramps. If you've ever driven on the Interstate 10 at night, you've surely seen long-haul truckers snoozing on ramps. Or you can go all-in on the car camping lifestyle and embrace RV living. Although that's a much pricier proposition, it could be the perfect cure for your wanderlust. Pro tip: If you want to go the RV route, look into renting an RV through Outdoorsy. With Outdoorsy, you'll receive 100% free roadside assistance, plus you can have the RV delivered to you. 19. Avoid National Parks National park campsites are expensive and competitive. Look for rarer alternatives, such as national forest campgrounds, wilderness reserves, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) tracts. The standard national forest campground fee is \$5 per night per unimproved site, although more popular or amenity-rich campgrounds can cost much more. Designated or backcountry campsites in wilderness areas and BLM land are often free, although you may be expected to apply for a one-time entry permit. Be aware of the regionality of these free or cheap camping resources. The Bureau of Land Management owns virtually no land east of the Mississippi, for instance. Wilderness areas and national forests abound near Western cities like Denver and Portland, but they're few and far between within easy driving distance of major East Coast population centers. 20. Look for Backcountry and Primitive Sites If you're willing to schlep your tent and sleeping gear a mile or two in from the nearest parking area, opt for a cheap or free backcountry or primitive site in a state or federally protected area. Primitive sites, which may have fire rings and other rudimentary resources, are generally first-come, first-served. Bring a detailed area map and have a backup plan if your preferred spot is taken. Some wilderness areas allow true backcountry camping anywhere within designated camping zones, but you'll want to check ahead for fire restrictions and keep in mind that you'll need to pack everything back up — except human waste, which you'll need to bury — leaving nothing behind to spoil the site. Final Word Used properly, each of the strategies listed here will reduce your next vacation's lodging budget. They're not the only foolproof ways to trim your nightly outlays though. One option of which I'm a big proponent doesn't fit neatly into any of this guide's four categories: scheduling long-distance travel overnight, where the price of your nightly accommodation is equal to the price of your ticket. If you're traveling to another continent, your transoceanic flight may well fall overnight anyway. Once you're in-country, crunch the numbers and determine whether it makes financial and logistical sense to spend a dark eight hours in a train cabin or bus seat, rather than a hostel or hotel room.

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