

# How to tame travel costs

Download apps, collect miles, and try teleconferences to trim the tab.

By Dawn Wotapka

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Bright!Tax found the ultimate solution for cheaper travel: Everyone stays put. Given that it does accounting work for thousands of Americans who live overseas and has clients in more than 150 countries, "it would be impossible for us to have a physical presence in so many disparate locations," said CEO Greg Dewald.

Instead, Bright!Tax used technological advancements in videoconferencing to handle many communications that previously could have required a trip. But such an approach isn't possible for all CPAs. Many professionals say some face-to-face time is still necessary—to get new business, keep up ties with current clients, or work with someone who needs hands-on attention. "If you're doing an audit, you can't do all the necessary audit procedures without being there," said Wayne Pinnell, CPA, managing partner of Haskell & White LLP.

For years, many employees viewed business travel as a free vacation that came with a high-end room. "Travel industry terms like 'business class' and 'executive platinum' reinforce the connection between business travelers and high spending," said Dan Ruch, founder and CEO of Rocketrip Inc. Now, however, more CPAs are trying to cut costs when traveling. While getting that swanky room is still possible, he said, you'll probably have to get it at a discount.

Here are a few ways to keep the tab down while traveling on the company dime:

- **Think local.** As accounting firms continue to consolidate, more firms are asking colleagues to step in and meet with nearby clients. Rick David, CPA, is COO of UHY Advisors Inc., part of UHY International, one of the world's largest accounting networks, which gives him access to offices in many locations. Pinnell points out that reducing costs isn't the only benefit: "We're saving valuable time" for employees who don't have to travel.
- **Try the shared economy.** Ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft are moving beyond big cities, giving travelers more choices for local transportation. The apps are easy to use and send you an email receipt, he added. Airbnb, which allows people to rent out their rooms and homes to lodgers, has primarily been considered a site for casual vacations. It's now adding business services to grow its professional market. "Reduce your team's trip costs by giving them a kitchen where they can cook and a parking spot to call their own," [the site touts](#).
- **Stay longer.** Some executives who travel for business actually stay a few days longer than the work part of their trip. Known as "bleisure," this type of travel can help a company because it may be able to arrange travel on cheaper days of the week. While execs still pay their tabs during the leisure part of the trip, the employer picks up the business-related costs, including the airfare. In a similar way, it also can be possible to trim a travel tab by flying in a day earlier and staying overnight, depending on the flight cost. For example, an \$800 flight for a same-day, round-trip ticket would cost more than a \$300 flight and a \$200 hotel room, even after local taxes are tacked onto the bill.
- **Reward employees.** Some companies let staffers pocket some extra cash if they eat inexpensive meals. Savvy travelers pack snacks ahead of time or look for discount and grocery stores to stock up once they arrive at their destination. "I find that, rather than buying the fancy water in the room, they have the gift shop or there's a shop nearby, so I'll pick up something for less," Pinnell said. Travelers also can check Groupon.com and local ads for dining specials.

Anyone who's ever planned a vacation intuitively knows ways to save on a trip. The best way for companies to save on business travel costs is to give employees a real reason to extend the cost-effective habits they're already practicing on their own," he said.

- **Remember the basics.** Frequent-flier miles and loyalty points might seem like a pain, but for businesses, all that loyalty adds up. And these days, apps and other programs make keeping track of everything easier. David says his company recently got a \$1,500 ticket with credits. Meanwhile, book early; doing so can save as much as 40% on airfares, Ruch said, and fly at off-peak hours or on days that generally have lower fares.
- **Try a teleconference:** Of course, as Bright!Tax discovered, it may make fiscal sense to not travel at all. "We found video conferencing to be a very effective way to communicate. After the first minute, you do feel like the person is right there," David said. "This allows you to get that face-to-face perspective without having to endure the agonies of being a road warrior." Another bonus is that services such as Skype and other apps can be downloaded and used for free or a minimal cost, though companies should make sure they have proper security. "It's more acceptable. Before you had to rent out a conference room with video equipment," David said of teleconferencing. "Now, we just do it in our office."

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