We just came back from a vacation. A wintertime break is a great way to get an influx of sunshine and a rest from our cold temperatures. But it’s also a great way to empty your checking account. Let’s look at some ways to reduce the costs of that winter vacation.

Lodging is always a major cost on a trip. Hotels can be very expensive during the height of the season. One way to reduce costs is to plan the trip in the off season or shoulder season. Those of us from Alaska know that the cost of a hotel room here goes up on May 1 and goes down on Sept. 15. So, if you can, choose to visit in your destination’s off season. Your costs will be from 30 to 50 percent cheaper.

Look for bargain costs on the Internet at priceline.com, hotels.com or any of the usual travel sites such as travelocity, orbitz or kayak.

Bed and breakfasts are another good choice. They are usually a little cheaper and you have the added bonus of one meal included in the price. I love the idea of having a local resident to help guide me on a trip. Locals know where the best-kept secrets are in a community. Check out booking.com, tripadvisor.com, bedandbreakfast.com or bbonline.com for current listings.

We chose to rent a house at our vacation spot. The house provided us with a place to prepare meals and a place to hang out and spend time together. You can rent a house, apartment or condo by checking the Internet at www.airbnb.com or www.vrbo.com. Some people even recommend that you check out craigslist in your destination city. Be sure to check the accommodations carefully before you put your money on the line. And the old story still plays out: “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.” Do a web search for the property directly and make sure they are well established and legitimate. You also might avoid some booking fees.

How does free sound? Housing swaps have become very popular with adventurous travelers. You trade your house for one in your vacation spot. We live in Alaska; people
would love to have an Alaskan vacation. So, you just find someone in Hawaii who is looking for a ski vacation when you are ready for some sun. Keep in mind that everyone has to want to travel at the same time for a swap to work. You have to judge your willingness for a stranger to be in your house and some people aren’t as comfortable with this.

A home-exchange vacation has the advantage of allowing you to act like a local. You can find homes — from a palazzo in Italy to a beachfront bungalow in the United States — through exchange clubs, which have web listings and directories you can browse for annual fees that range from $30 to $125. More than 30,000 people belong to these clubs. Roughly half are families with children still at home, a third are retirees, and the rest are younger couples and singles.

Some of these swaps even come with the family car, avoiding that additional cost. So, you have no lodging costs, cheaper meals since you have a kitchen to prepare your meals, and no car rental costs. Vacations don’t get much cheaper than that. Be sure to check pictures and references listed with the home. Try homeexchange.com, seniorhomeexchange.com or homelink.org.

Vacation lodging can cost the moon or can come in at a reasonable rate. All that money you save on lodging can be used on other parts of the trip, so choose the less expensive route.

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