



Insider Traveling
Tips from the Travel Gurus at Bill Me Later

Easing Holiday Travel Hassles

Traveling over the holidays is more of a hassle; after all, this is the busiest time of year! Crowded flights and airports, airline restrictions, fuel costs and the everyday glitches of traveling and you have a recipe for frayed nerves and headaches. These are a few basic measures that you can take to make your holiday trips more bearable.

- **Avoid peak travel days if you can.** Change the days that you arrive and/or depart. Fridays and Sundays are typically busiest (and most expensive.) The Sunday after Thanksgiving is the year's most traveled day. Mid-week travel is usually the best option; the fares will often be a good indication of passenger load; in general, lower fares = fewer travelers. By flying on an evening flight, the savings on airfare merit the extra hotel night. Do some research; a little flexibility pays off.
- **Put essentials in your carry-on.** Planning ahead for potential mishaps can save headaches. With the added pressure on baggage handlers, lost luggage is a real possibility. Pack essentials in your carry-on just in case - prescription drugs, a change of clothes, etc. It's always disheartening to be sitting on the beach dressed in your winter woollies.
- **Prepare for security checks.** Speed the airport security process by being prepared in advance. Keep in mind a few simple tips:
 - Wear slip-on shoes, or at least unlace or unzip them as you near the checkpoint.
 - Liquid or gel (that means lip-gloss, ladies) is in a maximum 3 oz. container and all are in a quart size clear plastic bag. Take the bag out for examination before you reach the screening area. Beverages should be purchased after the security check.
 - Remove coats or jackets as well as any belts with large metal buckles.
 - Take out your laptop computer or any other large electronic devices for separate screening.
 - Have your photo I.D. and boarding pass handy. If traveling internationally, open your passport to the photo page and insert your boarding pass to hold the place.
 - Check your pockets for loose change, metal pens, etc.
- **Be prepared for delays.** Bring things to keep occupied. If you are traveling with children, be sure that you are equipped with games, books, etc. It may be worth investing in a portable DVD player to soothe your tired travelers with their favorite movies. If you have a layover late in the day, it may be advisable to check out local hotels just in case a delay requires your spending the night. In general, the six "P's" apply: "Proper prior planning prevents poor performance."

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Volunteer Vacations

Like many holidays, the true meaning of Thanksgiving is often lost among the food and festivities. But, particularly this year, with so much change, there is good reason for each of us to pause for reflection and gratitude. It is the ideal time to give back and share some of our own bounty. With the devastation wrought by recent hurricanes, many are in need. If you're planning a trip this holiday, why not travel to a place that will receive a special benefit from your being there? Often a good way to contribute is to visit an area that is experiencing difficulties. Your travel dollars are a boost to their economy and you'll receive a warm welcome! In addition, you'll quite often find excellent values on hotels and attractions.

Houston Is Happening!

Texas was hit by Hurricane Ike and Houston sits just at the edge of the disaster area. But, this booming Texas town is still open for business and visitors will find plenty of action for the whole family. Two airports make getting there easy and a wide selection of hotels and resorts offer great places to stay! Dining is also a treat -- from bigger-than-life Texas barbecue to authentic Mexican and other international cuisine, you'll certainly not go hungry. Attractions abound as well -- NASA's Johnson Space Center let's you pretend you're an astronaut with activities, exhibits and tours that launch you into space. Houston's aquarium and zoo are also first-rate. There are numerous theme parks for the kids and adult thrill-seekers as well as both a horse and greyhound track. If you want to lend a much-needed hand while you're there, several organizations will match your skills with an appropriate area of need.

New Orleans -- A Cajun Thanksgiving

While New Orleans is still struggling from the effects of hurricane Katrina, the spirit of the one-of-a-kind city is still alive and many of its primary tourist areas are completely restored or were never really affected in the first place. Celebrate Thanksgiving in a city whose food is among the worlds finest! Sample Creole classics like jambalaya or crawfish etouffe or indulge in the Cajun holiday feast -- "turdouken" -- a chicken cooked inside a duck, cooled inside a turkey. There are plenty of entertainment alternatives. Visit Jackson Square for some local color where street performers are always in action. Ghost Tours showcase the French Quarter's happy haunts. And, one of the most visited sites is the tomb of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau at the Historic St. Louis Cemetery. More earthy pursuits include the Audubon Zoo and the Audubon Aquarium of the Americas. Both are open every day except Monday and are closed on Thanksgiving Day. A bit farther, but worth the trip, is Avery Island -- a tiny bayou island about a 1.5 hour drive from the city. Owned by the McIlhenny family, this is where the Tabasco hot pepper sauce has been brewed and bottled for 128 years. The island is itself a beautiful and unusual natural preserve and the Bird Gardens feature exotic bird species in their bayou habitat.

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At Sea for the Holidays

If your idea of a holiday is escaping reality, a Thanksgiving cruise may be just the ticket! You'll only need to unpack once and hot-and-cold holiday feasts abound! If your schedule is flexible, check online for last-minute deals. All the major cruise lines offer dramatic discounts to those who can travel at the last minute. If spontaneity is part of your vocabulary, you could be rewarded with significant savings!

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A Traditional Virginia Thanksgiving

Travel back in time to Charlottesville, Virginia. On Thanksgiving Day, just twenty minutes east of this historic town in Keswick, Virginia, you can witness an annual event that has taken place at Grace Church since 1929. The Blessing of the Hounds is a ceremony that was born in 8th century France to honor St. Hubert, the patron saint of hunters. The Keswick Hunt turns out for the Thanksgiving Day foxhunt in scarlet coats and black boots polished to mirror sheen, atop well-groomed horses that are also dressed for the festivities; the manes and tails are neatly braided and their coats shine. Read More The foxhunters ride right into the 200 year-old colonial churchyard along with the pack of foxhounds. Visitors gather among the horses and hounds and then walk across the street to watch the beginning of the chase as some 100 riders fan out across the countryside.

Many Charlottesville's hotels and restaurants offer both Thanksgiving feasts and lodging -- among them Keswick Hall -- an 18th century mansion and the Bow's Head Inn -- a member of the Historic Hotels of America. If you're in the mood for history, Charlottesville is just the place since it is home to Monticello, as well as the University of Virginia, which was also designed and built by our third president. Only a brief drive outside town is Ash Lawn, home of President James Monroe. As a college town, there is good food and entertainment in Charlottesville, including a vibrant music scene. Fly into Dulles International Airport, rent a car and take the easy two-hour drive to Charlottesville for breathtaking Southern farmland and Civil War battlegrounds with the Blue Ridge Mountains always the ethereal backdrop. For the Blessing of the Hounds, arrive by 9:30 a.m. for a good spot to park and watch. The service begins promptly at 10 a.m. Grace Episcopal Church, Virginia.

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