

# The Cost of Traveling in Southeast Asia

Costs Broken Down



# What 6 Months of Traveling in Southeast Asia Cost Me

I just wrapped up a glorious 8 month backpacking trip in Southeast Asia on a long-term traveler's budget. This meant staying in dorms, taking local transport, eating street food, and generally traveling on a shoestring budget. Though I could have spent far more (or even perhaps a little less), I wanted to know if it was plausible, at least semi-comfortable, and enjoyable to travel on a tight budget. Most of all, I wanted to know,

## **How much money is needed for a long-term trip in Southeast Asia?**

This is probably the most important and common question that any long-term traveler in the planning stages asks (and one I get quite often) when considering a trip through Southeast Asia. Some guide books will swear that \$30/day or less is sufficient - let me just say that this is generally not realistic.

Though I traveled all through Southeast Asia and Oceania for **10 months**, for the purposes of this guide, I am whittling it down to if I had spent just six months in Southeast Asia. This encompasses a month each in Cambodia, Laos, northern Thailand, southern Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

## **What did I personally spend?**

\$7,958 (without SCUBA diving - \$6,095)

With flights and pre-trip expenses: \$11,000

## **The Breakdown:**

## Flights: \$1500

I bought two [one-way](#) flights to get from LAX to Southeast Asia and back. In hindsight, this may not have been the cheapest way to travel (I could have saved a couple hundred dollars by booking round-trip), however, I was entirely unsure of my dates and departure city. Sometimes, the penalties and restrictions on moving flights ends up making a RT flight too much of a hassle. I almost always book international flights using [Expedia](#) because most flights have a 24-hour cancellation policy and they're often the best priced.

Though rare as I normally traveled overland and by public transport, I booked flights from time to time when overland travel was not feasible or I simply didn't have time. One series of flights in around Indonesia was particularly painful at \$300.

## Travel Insurance: \$793

This is one of those costs that's annoying, but necessary should the worst occur. I went with [World Nomads Travel Insurance](#) which happened to be cheaper than any other company I could find for US citizens.

Tip: If you know for sure how much time you'll be away, buying more months upfront is definitely cheaper than extending periodically.

## Immunizations: \$350

You're out of luck if you're an American when it comes to travel immunizations, because chances are you'll be covering them out of pocket. I [personally elected not](#) to take Malaria pills nor get rabies vaccinations because of costs associated and unlikelihood of either becoming a real issue.

In order to get immunized the cheapest way possible, visit the travel specialist at your local county healthcare clinic.

## Travel Gear: \$400

My backpack alone cost me over \$200, but was worth every penny as nothing ever broke and I'll be able to use it for years to come. I also invested in [Pacsafe products](#)

to keep everything protected, which I do not regret! [Check my guide out](#) for essential travel items.

Food: Average of \$10-15/day

Eating local delights and choosing street food when possible is the best way to keep food costs down. The food tastes better and costs much less when it's a local dish vs. a western dish. Why order a disappointing burger for \$4 when I could have amazing steamed pork buns, papaya salad, coconut soup, pad thai (the list is endless!) in Thailand for less than \$1?

Don't fear street food. It's cooked right in front of you and may even be fresher and less processed than the food available at home.

Accommodation: \$2-\$20/day

This really varied depending on high/low season and country. Cambodia and Laos were the cheapest while Indonesia and Malaysia tended to be more expensive and provided less value for the money.

Cheapest place:

Cambodia, land of the \$2 dorm rooms.

Most expensive place:

Malaysian Borneo, mainly due to the cost of activities.

Sunglasses Lost/broken:

6 - two were swallowed by rivers, two simply broke, and two seem to have grown legs, mysteriously gotten up, and walked away.

Pairs of flip flops lost:

4 - a dog made off with a pair, 2 were washed away by the ocean (and I still feel bad - sorry ocean!), and one got left in a hostel by accident.

**Why couldn't I travel on only \$30/day?**

The \$30/day benchmark does not take into account gear, insurance, flights, and immunizations. It's also easy to forget that things like soap, shampoo, toothpaste, sunscreen, batteries, adapters, mosquito repellent, medication, and visas all need to be periodically purchased on the road. The cost seems small but when budgeting only \$30 for one day, \$4 on a small bottle of shampoo can really add up.

The \$30 benchmark is more than realistic, if not a little rich, when staying in one place for an extended period of time in one of the cheaper countries. I was able to spend \$3/night on accommodation and around \$10/day on food and drink in [Otres Beach, Cambodia](#), for example. I didn't spend a dime on activities because the beach was free. But what about the days when I moved around? What about the times I had to spend \$40 on a visa, \$9 on a bus ride, and \$3 on a water taxi? My budget was blown before I even bought food or a bed for the night.

What about the days that I wanted to visit [Angkor Wat](#) (that was a \$40 entrance fee), go [SCUBA diving](#), or [jungle trekking](#)? An extremely low budget is only feasible if you hardly move around and never spend anything on activities, but why travel to the other side of the world only to miss out on these things?

If I had not SCUBA dived, climbed [Mt. Kinabalu](#), gone trekking in Bukit Lawang or Mt. Rinjani, I would have shaved over \$3000 off of my trip easily. I also never spent more than a week in any one place. Had I moved more slowly, I could have saved a lot more.

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### **How to keep costs low**

- All hope is not lost if you have a smaller budget to work with. To keep costs low, use services like [couchsurfing](#) for free accommodation. Not into it? Stay in dorms. They are a great way to meet people and save some cash. House sitting is also a possibility though less so in Southeast Asia
- Always travel local instead of by private or tourist coach, even if that means travel days are longer. If you're rich in time but not in funds, this is the best way to do it

- Eat local foods and abstain from alcohol. The biggest budget eater is partying, by far. If you never buy drinks, you'll literally save *thousands*. Really, thousands!
- Use a debit card that doesn't charge fees and refunds the ATM fees assessed by other banks. The only one I'm aware of is Charles Schwab

Lastly, I only spent three days in Vietnam. I understand this to be a pretty cheap country, while southern Thailand, Malaysian Borneo, and certain activities I did in Indonesia were quite expensive. Cut out these countries and spend more time in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and northern Thailand, and your budget will last longer.

For a country-specific budget guide on each place mentioned above, I go into more detail in each of these posts:

[Cambodia](#)

[Laos](#)

[Thailand](#)

[Peninsular Malaysia](#)

[Malaysian Borneo](#)

[Indonesia](#)

[Vietnam](#)

[Philippines](#)

*Note: Though I spent roughly three months in Thailand, and six weeks each in Malaysia and Indonesia, for the purposes of this article, I crunched the numbers to make it a month each for simplification and easier planning.*

**How much do you usually spend on traveling? Do you have any budget travel tips to share?**

[Conquering Mountains: The Guide to Solo Female Travel](#)



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