

far your money will travel when you travel in Mexico, the American dollar was worth 280 Mexican pesos; in 1986, it bought you 618 pesos. "It's a steal for this summer, too, which makes Mexico number one on the list. Canada also ranks very, very high. In terms of value for dollar, or in this case value for dollar exchange, it's hard to think of two places that are going to be better than that."

HOW TO ATTACK A CITY

You're there. You've made it. The trouble is you've landed in a strange place, a place where the people, the customs and the terrain are all, well, foreign to you. You've gone to a lot of effort and expense to get where you're going, so why not make it all worthwhile and spend your time as wisely and efficiently as you've spend your money?

Let *The American Express Real Life Planner* help you mount a plan of attack. Most cities, you'll find, both at home and abroad, can be brought down to size with a basic game plan. Follow our lead to ensure that a desired sight does not go unseen.

- Get your hands on a local map. You can find one at most souvenir stores or newsstands, and you'll find it's the only way to really get a handle on the lay of the land. And don't shell out big bucks for a heavily foot-noted and illustrated number; all you're looking for is some perspective on your new surroundings.
- Read. Find a local book store, where you should pick up a good book, one well versed in the lore and history of your new environment. You never know what might spark your interest as you turn the pages.
- Take a tour. You'll usually be able to find a bus or walking tour in most tourist-friendly cities, and you can take in a city's big picture before deciding which of the smaller snapshots you'd like to explore.
- Take a walk. Preferably a long one. If you're staying in the heart of a town, a good stroll from your room will put you in touch with a new place like nothing else we can

think of. If you're staying on the outskirts, get your feet on a bicycle, or moped, to help you take in the sights.

- Learn the local definitions for the accommodations you'll be seeking. A pension, hostel, or bed-and-breakfast can mean different things in different parts of the world, so it's a good idea to get a handle on the distinctions before you register for a night's stay. All offer low-price lodging that usually includes breakfast. Generally speaking, a pension is a small hotel or boardinghouse (you'll get your own room, but you'll probably have to share a bath). A hostel offers supervised lodging, primarily for young people (you'll have to share a room, most likely in a dormitory-type arrangement). Bed-and-breakfasts will likely offer quaint, private quarters in what could pass as someone's quaint, private home (again, you'll have to share a bath, but you'll get to feast on some hearty home cooking). Unfortunately, the three terms are sometimes used interchangeably, so find out what they mean where you're staying.
- Make good use of the local visitors' bureau or tourism office. You'll find one wherever you de-plane or de-train, and it's a smart idea to stop in to collect brochures, maps and assorted tips.
- Spend at least one day with no game plan whatsoever. Some of your best times will likely come when you let the mood of the city move you.

THE AMERICAN EXPRESS REAL LIFE TRAVEL PLANNER

Below, The American Express Real Life Planner offers some of the best travel advice we could muster, all of it designed to minimize hassle, maximize value and help ensure that all is smooth sailing the next time you leave home:

- Always keep a valid passport. You never know when the opportunity for international travel will present itself, and you'll never forgive yourself if the chance-of-a-lifetime trip slips away on a technicality as avoidable as not having a valid passport. Renew ahead of schedule, by

mail, to avoid unnecessary lines and headaches. Write down your passport number and keep it in a safe place, in the event that you and your passport become separated.

- If you're traveling abroad, make it a habit to learn the location of the American Embassy upon arrival in each new country. You never know when you'll need to call on one to help you out of a tight spot. Make a mental note of its location and file it away on the off-chance you'll need it.

• It's a good idea to know the politics of an area before you visit. No matter where you are, there are trouble spots to be avoided, and you'll be smart to single them out before you find yourself in the middle of one.

- Store all valuables (including your passport) in the hotel safe, or on your own person. It's never a good idea to leave anything behind in your hotel room, even if it's well hidden. Limit your jewelry to a watch and (for women) a few costume pieces. A good rule of thumb: don't take something if it would ruin your vacation to lose it.

• Only travel with credit cards you're likely to need; gas, store and other specific charge cards will only clutter your wallet, and make your life even more difficult if they should be lost or stolen. The American Express card will always give you the best available rate of exchange for the day of your transaction.

- When traveling abroad, exchange some pocket money at a major international bank in your hometown before you leave. It's always helpful to have some appropriate loose change handy for taxis, porters, snacks and such. You'll be able to exchange money in most international airports, but the rates of exchange will not always be the best available. If you leave things to the last minute you're likely to lose out on a few dollars. Read the financial pages in the days before your departure to seek out the best rates.

• Ask about appropriate local tipping customs. In some parts of the world, gratuities are not expected; in others, they're expected only when you leave. Hotel and meal bills may include a service charge, so be sure not to double-tip.

- If you're in town for the day, or for a few hours, and you've got no place to store your stuff, look for a locker. You'll find them in most major air terminals, train stations and museums around the world, and they beat lugging the stuff around (they're also very cheap).

• Ideally, you should never get on a plane with more luggage than you can stuff under your seat, or above your head in the luggage compartments. A word to the wise: things tend to get heavier as you

